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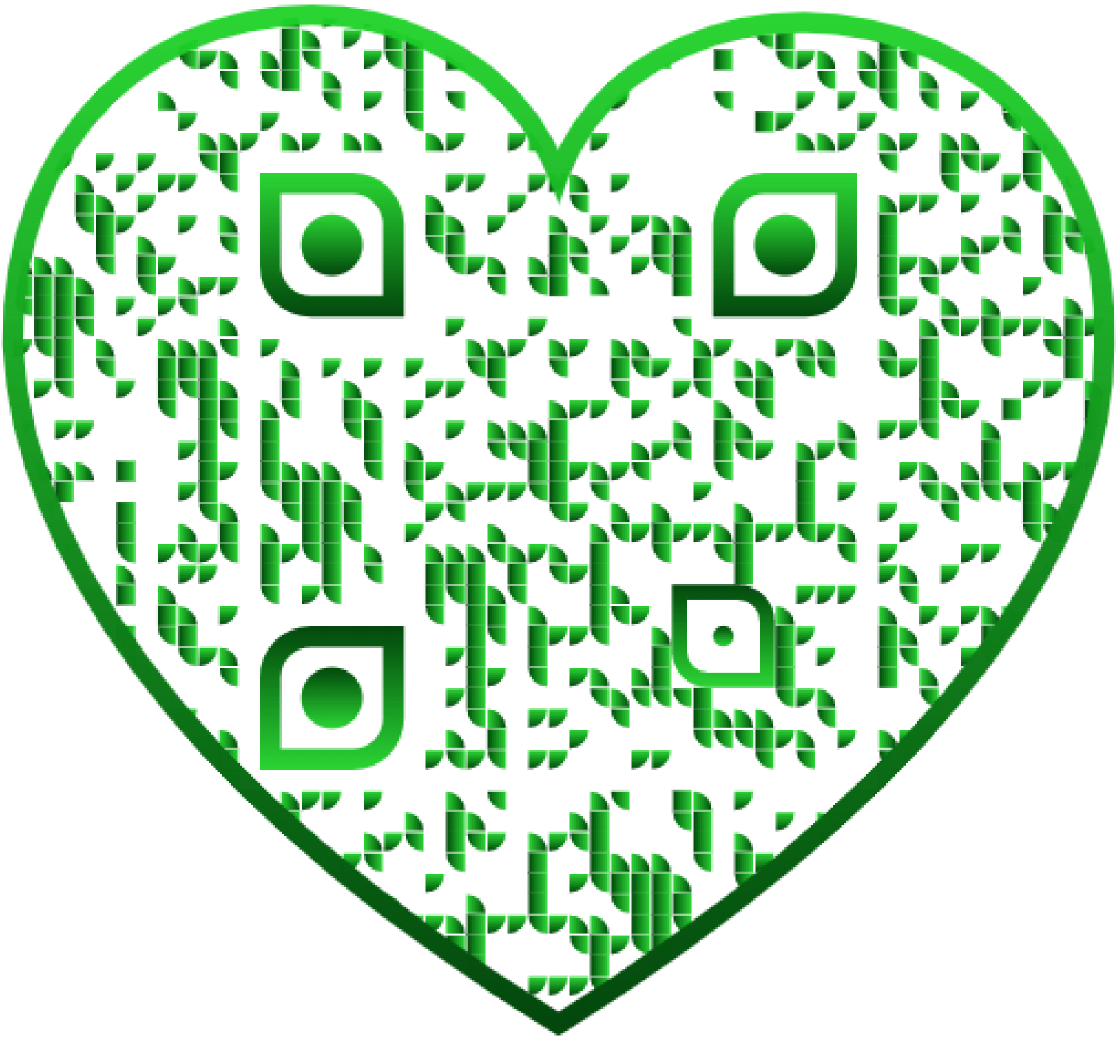

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THE ROOT NOTE

Our play-along session on the main stage at the London Acoustic Show is off and running. Chris Woods reports that many of you have already registered your interest and are learning your chosen part of the piece. The Guitar Revolution train is on its way, so jump onboard and make sure you're part of this special project. Remember: no costs, no fees – just a little investment in practice time and a visit to the show on 10 September are all that's needed! And while we're talking about the show, be sure to read our special features with Preston Reed and Clive Carroll – two of the many artists performing at Olympia London in September.

The response to Chris Woods' Guitar Revolution project shows what a special place the world of acoustic is. Looking back over the years, much has changed in the world of acoustic music and guitars – and almost without exception, the changes have been for the better. Acoustic guitar production and standards are as good as they have ever been and thanks to the likes of Ed Sheeran, Jake Bugg, Ben Howard and Mumford & Sons, playing acoustic guitar is 'cool' again. Despite the pressures online sales are bringing to bear on traditional brick-and-mortar retailers, sales of acoustic guitars right across the price ranges continue to be strong – and long may that continue.

My time, however, as editor of *Acoustic* is to come to an end, and this issue will be my last. As some of you will know, *Acoustic* magazine was first published in late 2004 and it was my privilege to be involved in that launch and be the magazine's editor for the first four years of its life. This time last year I was asked to return to the editor's chair.

I have enjoyed immensely both tenures in the hot seat. I have met some inspiring artists, luthiers and industry professionals, and I've enjoyed playing and reviewing some amazing guitars, but a new chapter awaits working with Martin Guitars – yes, from one dream job to another. I'd like to say a big thank you to those I have worked with over the years, and

to the suppliers and distributors who have supported the magazine in various ways. Most of all I'd like to thank you, our valued readers. Without you, there simply wouldn't be a magazine.

Taking over will be Nick Robbins, who has worked on *Acoustic* for a number of years. You're in safe hands with Nick – he's one of the good guys – and I know you'll give him the same support that I've enjoyed. There are exciting times ahead for the magazine, so be sure to stay close and enjoy the ride.
Enjoy the issue, and good bye!

Steve Harvey
Editor

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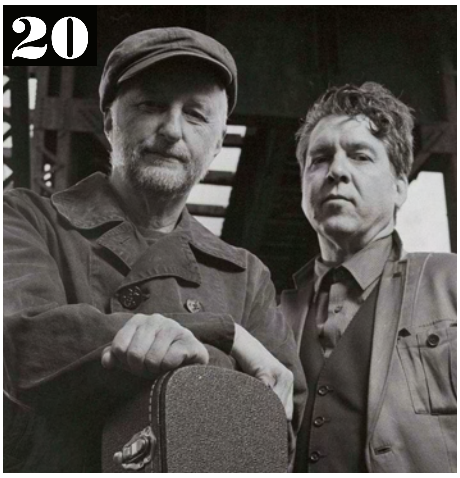

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BENJAMIN FRANCIS LEFTWICH – NEW TOUR AND ALBUM

Many new albums come prefaced with the words 'highly awaited' – but Yorkshire singer-songwriter Benjamin Francis Leftwich's return to the spotlight this year will get an extra warm reception from fans, after the musician admitted heart-breaking personal circumstances in the intervening period were behind his continued absence.

Leftwich will undertake a 28-date headline tour through the UK and Europe this September on the back of second album *After The Rain*, due out on 19 August. The 26-year-old's 2011 debut album, *Last Smoke Before the Snowstorm*, sold more than 100,000 copies worldwide with more than 150 million global Spotify plays. Leftwich also appeared on the main stage at the London Acoustic Show in 2012.

However, success was tempered by tragedy after the singer's father became ill and Leftwich took the understandable decision to return to his Yorkshire home to care for him – subsequently weathering a period of depression after his death.

© Richard Ecclestone

"I just knew that I needed to not do this for a while," admits Leftwich. "For me, I just needed to live outside of music."

Now, five years later, Leftwich returns with a new album produced by award-winning Alt-J sound engineer Charlie Andrew and a tour that kicks off in September in Norwich and London (at the famous Islington Assembly Hall). Full tour dates can be found at:
www.benjaminfrancisleftwich.com

THIS WILD LIFE GET WILDER WITH NEW ALBUM

Californian alternative rock duo This Wild Life have announced that their new album *Low Tide* will be released on 9 September – two years after their debut, *Clouded*, charted as the No 1 Top New Artist, No 1 Top Alternative New Artist and No 17 Independent Album on Billboard.

Anthony Del Grosso and Kevin Jordan recorded *Low Tides* with producer/ engineer Aaron Marsh of Copeland and an extra helping hand lent by Jason Suwito of Sir Sly on production.

Jordan said: "We went into this album much more open-minded than we did on the last one because we've listened to so much new music over the past three years."

Since their formation in 2010, the Long Beach natives have notched up a cool 34 million album streams, 32 million YouTube views and 400k social media followers. Fans can pre-order *Low Tides* now at their official site or at iTunes where they can receive the single 'Pull Me Out' as an instant download.
www.thiswildlifeband.com

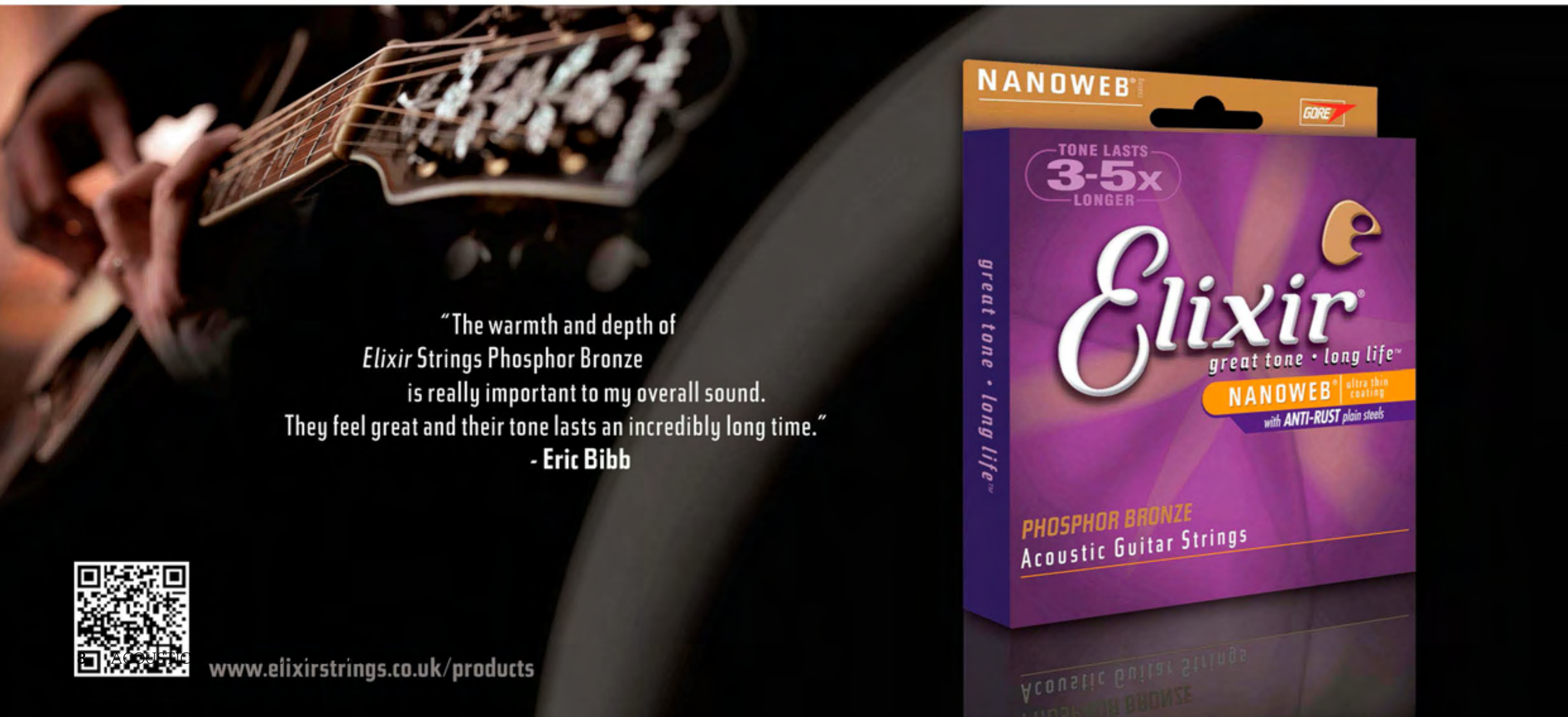
ROCKSCHOOL TEAMS UP WITH TAKAMINE

Rockschool, the world's leading contemporary music exam board, has partnered with Takamine for a scholarship programme aimed at aspiring acoustic guitarists.

The scholarship will reward outstanding academic achievement, with Takamine providing four acoustic guitars for the first guitarists to achieve a distinction at grades one, three, five and eight (a GD10, GN30-Black, GN51 and GY93E, respectively).

Rockschool's Nik Preston said: "Rockschool is incredibly proud to partner with such a giant of the acoustic guitar market. Takamine's consistent dedication to quality and the hard working musicians that it supplies make them an ideal partner for our acoustic syllabus scholarship."

The scholarship programme will open in September 2016 and close in July 2017. Winners will be selected during August and announced in September 2017.
To find out more visit: ***www.rslawards.com/ acoustic-scholarship***



SHOW OF HANDS – ROYAL ALBERT HALL GIG

Formidable acoustic-folk duo and three-time Show of Hands will mark 25 years in the business with a concert at the Royal Albert Hall on Easter Saturday 2017 (15 April). Singer-songwriter Steve Knightley and multi instrumentalist Phil Beer are no strangers to the iconic venue, having performed there four times, but this time they will be accompanied by their long term special guest, double bass player and vocalist Miranda Sykes.

Knightley, who has been hailed as one of the country's best singer-songwriters, said: "Hiring somewhere as high profile as the Albert Hall is obviously not something you undertake lightly but it's a challenge we relish. We are lucky enough to have an incredible fan base, not only in the UK but in France, Holland, Germany and beyond and hopefully a lot of them will be there to help us celebrate a quarter of a century as Show of Hands!"

In keeping with their rootsy background, the band's last gig at the hallowed 5,000-seater hall incorporated a country-fair style raffle – so concert-goers will no doubt be excited to see what the duo have planned for this special performance. Tickets available from ***www.royalalberthall.com***

TAYLOR 700 UPDATES LOOK

Taylor Guitars has redesigned their 700 Series – one of the few remaining guitar classes in the Taylor acoustic line that hasn't undergone a makeover in the past couple of years. The redesigned 700 Series features several tonal enhancements including Lutz spruce tops (provides a higher volume ceiling), performance bracing and protein glue.

With the new 700 Series, players can expect all of the musical richness of the original rosewood design, making them a particularly great option for the stage. Aesthetically, Taylor describes the new guitars as being "both rootsy and refined" with wood-rich details and other touches that artfully showcase Taylor's high-end craftsmanship.

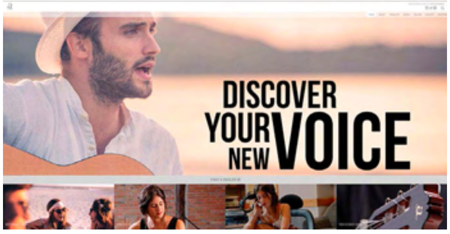
The new 700's feature optional Western Sunburst Top, Douglas Fir Herringbone rosette, Koa binding, half-herringbone top edge trim, bias-cut end-grain Douglas fir with maple/black accents, Green Abalone "Reflections" fretboard inlay and a Weathered Brown pickguard. Featured 700 Series models include the 710e, 712e 12-Fret, 714ce. ***www.taylorguitars.com***

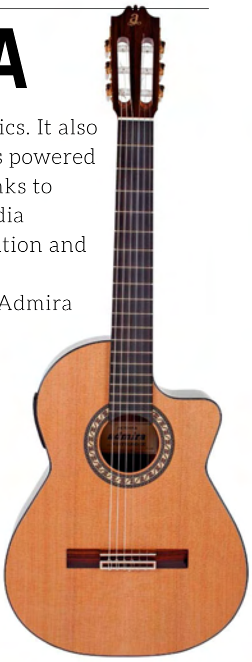
NEW SITE FOR ADMIRA

UK fans of Spanish brand Admira Guitars can now access their comprehensive extensive catalogue through a brand new, simple-to-use website.

Admira, whose guitars are particularly popular with teachers, schools and colleges, has made it easier for customers to select a suitable model, with the site giving in-depth explanations of each model's design and sound characteristics. It also includes a Google Maps powered retailer locator map, links to Admira's UK social media channels and a registration and feedback area.

Alex Mew, from UK Admira distributor Barnes & Mullins said: "The site is designed be a source of information that highlights how our beginner and student guitars offer a fun gateway into learning the guitar." ***www.admiraguitars.co.uk***





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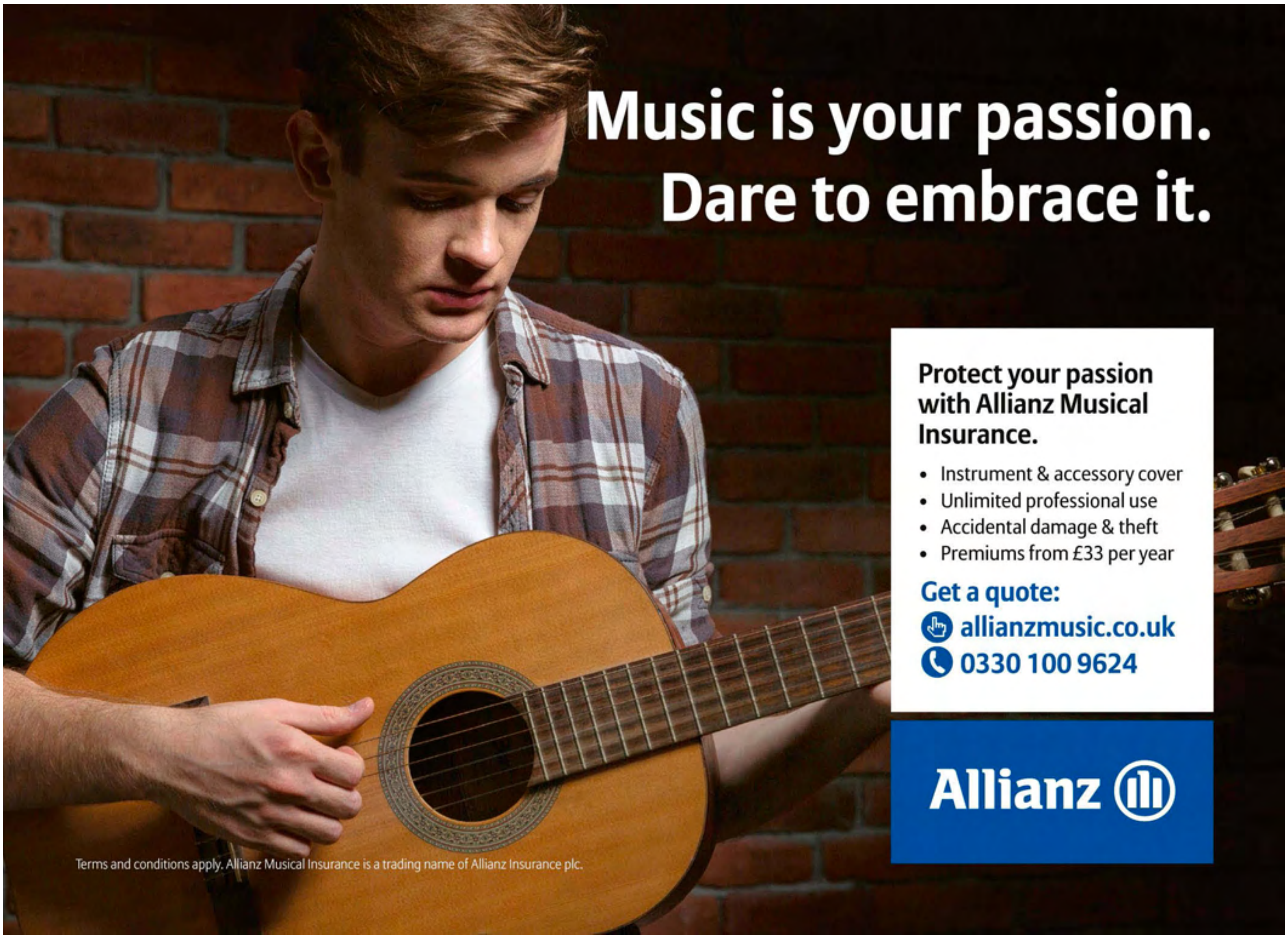
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ASK THE EXPERTS

THE MUSICIANS' UNION TELLS US HOW TO STAY CREATIVE WHEN THE PRESSURE IS ON

The creative process can be a mystery, and starting a new project can feel daunting when ideas are elusive. But inspiration is always just a thought or feeling away. For composers and songwriters, it's all about learning how to channel that first little flicker into a unique piece of music, and seeing it through to the end. The trick is to keep the energy and momentum going throughout the journey.

FIRST FLICKERS

When it comes to writing, anything can serve as inspiration: a feeling, a thought, nature, friends, lovers, family… Often, early influences are an ongoing inspiration, something to revisit again and again. Major life changes such as relationship breakdowns have always given rise to material for music writing. Some artists look at other art forms for inspiration, like poetry, works of art, film or literature. Overheard remarks can also be an interesting source of new ideas. If you're still not feeling it, why not try meditation, journaling or free association techniques to open mental and emotional space for inspiration? Inspiration really can come from anywhere.

PLAY AROUND

Try composing using an instrument that you don't normally play. This will force you to think about the structure and melody of your music in a whole new way. A new environment could give you a boost, as could spending time with other creative people, especially other musicians whose creativity you admire or with whom you work well. Improvise with as many different musicians as possible. Ultimately, improvising is all about risk-taking, and some people find this easier than others. Not only can you learn and be inspired by musicians around you, it can boost your own confidence as well. If improvising is not in your skillset, it's never too late to try.

REWARD YOURSELF

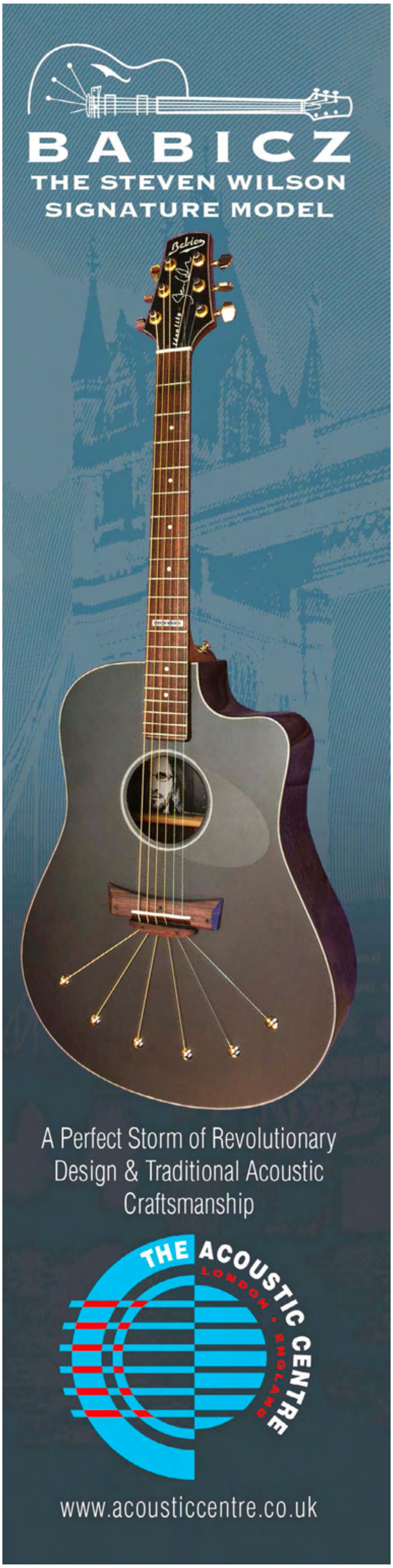
If you're energised and on fire with an idea, just keep working at it. Make up a reward system for yourself. For example, promise yourself a treat once you've finished the chorus. The reverse is also true: don't carry on if you're banging your head against a brick wall. If writing isn't working, take a break and do something physical: take a walk, ride a bike, swim. When you release physical tension your body relaxes and inspiration is more likely to come.

CREATE A TIMEFRAME

Deadlines can also drive you, so make one up if you don't have one – and stick to it. Focus on the piece of music in its completed form; feel how satisfied you will be when it is finished. Directing your mind to a particular goal can work well.

STILL FEELING STUCK?

Put our advice to the test with an MU networking session, where you can connect with other musicians. Find the next event near you via theMU.org. Or why not try one of our free workshops or online courses with FEU Training? They are free for MU members. Register via feutraining.org. ■



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JUNE SLUNG A GUITAR ACROSS HER BACK AND STEPPED INTO THE ROCK SCENE IN THE LATE '60S, FACING THE UNWRITTEN RULE: GUYS ROCK—GIRLS WATCH. SHE STOOD SHOULDER TO SHOULDER WITH MEN WHO WERE MORE RESPECTED. AND ROCKED. SHE OPENED FOR THE BIGGEST BANDS OF THE DECADE, STOOD UP FOR WHO SHE WAS AS A MUSICIAN, AND CHARTED A COURSE THAT OTHER WOMEN IN THE INDUSTRY COULD FOLLOW. TODAY, SHE HELPS RUN A NON-PROFIT TO PREPARE WOMEN FOR THE SAME PRESSURES. THE PIONEER WITH NO ROLE MODEL IS NOW A ROLE MODEL HERSELF. THIS STORY REMINDS US THAT THE WORLD NEEDS MORE TRAILBLAZERS LIKE JUNE. FOR MORE ON JUNE AND OTHER STORIES OF COURAGE THAT INSPIRE US, *visit taylorguitars.com*

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RALPH McTELL

It's been 14 years since he won a BBC 2 Folk Awards Lifetime Achievement award, but with a new album and celebratory concert, Ralph McTell reflects on why 'that' song hasn't always been a blessing

WORDS: STEPHEN BENNETT **IMAGES:** HAYLEY MADDEN

Ralph McTell is writing a letter. "It's something I do a lot more these days than I used to. If I'm moved by something I've seen or listened to, I'll try and let the person know. I think it's important." It's a deeply human sentiment: elegant, economical and the essence of what's made this determinedly un-showy son of Croydon a pillar of the acoustic music scene for over 50 years.

In much the same way Marilyn Monroe stepped onto that air-vent, and Geoff Hurst scored 'that' goal, Ralph McTell wrote 'that' song. None of them would ever quibble at being reminded of such singular, iconic glories, yet all three would happily point you towards a whole mountain range of achievement surrounding that one permanently sunlit peak.

Most contemporary artists would kill for a 14-year recording career, yet that's how long it is since McTell was formally recognised in the 'Lifetime Achievement' category at the BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards. Far from taking that as a cue to slow down, he's as active, both in recording and performing live, as he's ever been. There's the 70th birthday gig on DVD, the recent *Loyal Command Performance* at the Royal Albert Hall and a new album of back-porch folk-blues with his old mate and acoustic guitar-great, Wizz Jones.

"It's the kind of material we were doing when we first got together back in 1965. Wizz has always been the most fantastic rhythm-guitar player – probably my favourite ever. He doesn't let you get too studious about things so he works on the chemistry of 'if it works, it works', and I'll always go with that mainly because of what he means to me and anyone of my generation who ever picked up an acoustic guitar; especially anyone with any affection for early American blues. He was already a legend at 23 – I'd be about 16 or 17 – when I first saw him on Brighton Beach. I just stood there, awestruck, thinking 'that's Wizz Jones.' I was one of those kids who were completely sucked in by the magic of the acoustic guitar; the travelling, the lifestyle, that Woody Guthrie thing, just the mystical sound of a guitar body pressed up against your ear – I still do that to this day – and Wizz embodied all that."

When Jones heard young Ralph play, he invited him down to Cornwall and the stage was set. "It was like a knighthood for me, I couldn't believe it. I packed my guitar and off I went. Everything opened up from there. We were playing in a pub in Porth, near Newquay – one mic between us, taped to a broom handle with a bit of sellotape – and we got fired because the landlord couldn't cope with the crowds. It wasn't long before I was spotted by a publisher and ended up signing to Transatlantic. I owe all that to Wizz, really, and from there we've been lifelong friends."

After two days' recording for the new set, Jones left and McTell went back into the studio to add touches of banjo and harmonica to what is a beautifully relaxed, seemingly effortless hour's music; two like-minded souls just sitting around, doing what they do. "We went back to the songs we grew up with. It's an unpretentious bash and that's all we intended it to be."

The most frequently played records in the McTell collection were recorded in the 30s, "mostly by blind Delta musicians", and while he adopted his stage name from possibly the best of them, "listening to Robert Johnson still pins me to the wall with the same thrill as it did the first time. Those musicians – the kings of the acoustic guitar, really – what they achieved in spite of the disadvantages they had to overcome, I still find incredible to this day."

Wizz Jones wasn't alone, though, in introducing the country-blues to English audiences. "The chief exponents back then were the Kelly family, Dave [later of Blues Band fame] and his sister Joanne [likewise with the Groundhogs]. Like Rory Block in the US, who'd soaked up the music of the early blues singers at home from being a kid, they just listened and learned until it seemed to come so natural to them. I still think Dave has got one of the great blues voices, plus he's a fine guitar player."

The early blues scene wasn't all about trying to replicate the authentic originals, either. "Ewan McColl lived in Croydon. One day he said to me 'I've got Big Bill Broonzy round the house, do you fancy coming over for a listen?'" We'd probably all need a good split-second to consider that one. But such serendipity was rare. "I ruined half my record collection, lifting the needle on and off to go over certain passages, trying to learn them. Then, in '65, I moved to Paris and was busking around the Latin Quarter when I met a guitarist called Gary Petersen who was dodging the draft for Vietnam. He'd been taught by the Reverend Gary Davis and had a beautiful old Martin. I'd never heard anyone play like that. I always say, when you're playing guitar, it's like coming in at the basement; you start by groping around and it gets a bit lighter then you find a door. You push that door then there's a staircase up to the next floor and so on. Gary opened those doors: how to play bass

with the thumb, how to overlay a melody line. Suddenly, all these simple harmonies started to become orchestral. He was probably my single biggest influence at the time and I'm still just carrying on from there, really."

On the lyric front, McTell sought early inspiration from the Beat Poets as well as modern jazz and painting. "Anything that promised to reveal the mystery and meaning of life. It all suggested there was something out there I needed to find out about. I was fascinated by anyone who was 'alternative'. I think Tom Waits, who obviously draws on all that Beat/ Jack Kerouac tradition, is probably better than a lot of the originals, partly because he cares about meter and rhyme as well as the substance in the lyrics. He's really romantic and for me, those are the main ingredients. The Beat Poets had that 'benzedrine flow' that showed up in Bob Dylan's early writing. Look at 'Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie'. It's a masterpiece; totally driven by a passion for the subject."

Despite being in thrall to the ways of the troubadour, McTell wasn't convinced the path he'd embarked on was the wisest. "I was married and had a little boy, trying to be a socially responsible young father and, coming from a background of a broken home myself, I had – and still have – a strong sense of responsibility. There was always that feeling of 'will this actually work tonight?' Funnily enough, it's never really left me."

Even after 50 years of seeming so utterly at home, alone, in front of an audience? "I have to say in the last few years I've got a little bit more confident with regard to people still being there at the end of the evening, but I've always had that doubt." It's something he's discussed at length with another long-time friend from the old Transatlantic days, Billy Connolly. "He reminds me we should always try and push the boundaries a bit so I'll throw in something I don't play every night that's maybe going to tax me more. Sometimes the audience comes with me, sometimes they don't. Fortunately, these days, they tend to clap politely, regardless. The risk of something not working isn't a bad thing to have in the back of your mind. You can't be arrogant, especially as a solo performer. You're one, they're many. It's a two-way street. You're not performing 'at', it should be with and for." By now, Ralph's audience probably trusts him not to let them down. "Mostly, people are willing you to do well so they don't mind if you make the odd mistake or you're a bit nervous on the first song. It shows you're human."

Few humans, however, have rocketed, overnight, from the back-room folk clubs of South London to worldwide chart success and a near-mythical, Jimi Hendrix-led Isle of Wight Festival. Okay… maybe not quite overnight.

"I'd been playing a lot around Croydon – I'm all over those *Melody Maker* small ads from the 60s – but being invited up to Les Cousins was the first real badge of honour for me. The excitement level… just being part of that risqué Soho scene, it was like I'd suddenly found a way into whatever this great mystery was that was going on. I first saw Sandy Denny there, in the doorway of the Cousins – sobbing her heart out over a broken love affair. I saw Bert Jansch there, Roy Harper, John Martyn; they'd all go off to get loaded after the show and I'd be heading back to Croydon in my mini-van. Still, there was a unique prestige attached to playing in that little basement firetrap. Anyway… the Isle of Wight. Van Morrison had been booked to play the Royal Festival Hall and had to pull out. This was early '71 and it coincided with Granada having made a one-off special about me for their *Folk at the Two Brewers* series in Salford. They phoned my manager, Joe Lustig, who looked after pretty much the entire acoustic folk scene at the time, looking for someone to replace Van and he said, 'How about Ralph? He's doing quite well'. We sold the place out. So from there, Joe used Pentangle, who were already booked at the Isle of Wight, as a lever to get me on. I turned up with my acoustic and a shirt I'd swapped for a set of strings in Italy. I had no idea what to expect. I went out there, shaking like a leaf. There was a stool, two microphones, then me, in front of about 300,000 people. It was like playing to the ocean. And I got away with it."

Behind all this, of course, was the seismic impact of one great song. As hits go, 'Streets Of London' was still sailing out of the ball-park with no immediate signs of coming down. In a way, it never has.

McTell's been quoted as saying the song "opened a lot of doors for me but kept a few closed, as well." It's a tricky one. "I sometimes wonder, is this me complaining because I think I've written better songs but no one else does? Afterwards, I'd be trying to write songs that

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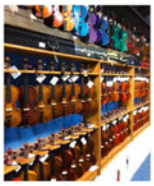

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might have a similar resonance and I'd get, 'yeah, that's great but it's not Streets of London, is it?' Everyone thought it was a song just about homelessness but it's not, it's about a friend who's alienated himself by heroin use. The characters in the song are there to show him it doesn't have to be like that, he can do something about it. But then, I suppose it was the right time for a song with that social impact.

"People draw conclusions about who I am musically and so aren't ready for the country-blues side or maybe equally powerful, socially-aware songs in a slightly different musical vein. My musical taste is vast – I listen to big bands, opera, Django..."

He wants his songs to be like short stories, vignettes, windows into the lives of extraordinary ordinary people. He's currently working on one about a disaffected merchant-seaman haunting a bar and another about a woman who finds refuge from personal tragedy in keeping her floors swept – another of the lovely, simple-yet-profound metaphors he readily captures so that we don't have to.

"I like to get inside the characters. Those are the songs that give me the most satisfaction. I'd never baulk at playing 'Streets of London', mind. I know how the audience feels about it and I sense a change in the atmosphere of a room when I start playing it; people sing along, their kids sing it in schools, it's even played in churches sometimes."

And there's another side he's come to accept, albeit wryly. "Guitarists come up to me and say, 'I'll bet you can't guess what the first tune I learned was' and I think 'you know what... I'll bet I can."

It's ironic, then, that the song most requested – "by a country mile" – at the recent Albert Hall gig was 'Clare To Here'; a story of failed dreams and longing for home that's a reflection of the deep affinity McTell's always felt with the Celtic ballad tradition and a love (long reciprocated) for Ireland, in particular. Croydon boy though he is, and proud of it, he played gigs in Northern Ireland throughout the Troubles and the local people – and subsequently the vast Celtic diaspora who also pack his concert venues around the world – have never forgotten that.

"I've never had anything but good things from the Irish. I had Irish friends growing up and at school. I love that spirit. When I went over in '69 the Troubles had just kicked off but it was a tremendous experience for me. I kept going back, too. Never had a second thought. You didn't ask people coming into your gigs which particular card they were carrying but, no, I never had a single problem."

We talk about his long and successful relationship with television, initially via the much-loved (and newly reissued) *Alphabet Zoo* songs. "I was tricked into it. My brother, who was looking after the business side at the time, told me we'd had an approach from Granada to write a few songs for kids. I said, 'No thanks, I know how that works. You get your bib-and-brace overalls on and a pair of white Kickers then start jumping up and down.' But then I thought, well... I have got four kids. And Woody Guthrie did it, after all."

The fears were soon allayed. He would get to write Ralph McTell songs for children. "I wasn't going to patronise anyone. I wanted to get to the human connection through whatever the subject was; danger, fear... even just making the parents laugh. Trouble is, I'd forgotten with 26 letters in the alphabet they'd want 26 songs."

Then it was reunion time with his old pal, Billy. "He came up with the *World Tour* films idea after the producers decided, with him always being so bored during the day, they needed to give him something to do. I had bits of songs lying around that we wove into themes for the England, Ireland and Scotland series,

"I sometimes wonder, is this me complaining because I think I've written better songs but no one else does"

and the Australia tune, 'In The Dreamtime', is still one of my most requested songs. It's proper grown-up work, that... getting your name on a TV credit." While he makes it sound so easy, the results are a perfect reflection of McTell's deep respect for other cultures and the intimately precise sense of place that marks his finest lyrics.

Whichever way the conversational compass points, he's both engaged and engaging, be it on the need for the Folk Awards to summon some posthumous recognition for one of his heroes, Davy Graham ("he could've played anything. I'm just happy he chose the guitar") or his beloved J45 and the new RM-50 Martin has just made for him ("It sings like a bird – it's the best new guitar I've ever played"). Then there are the inspirations who're still out there: Ry Cooder, "he hears the hidden stuff and brings it out – nobody does that better"; and Randy Newman, whom he supported at the Main Point in Philadelphia back in the 70s. McTell cites 'Louisiana' as a pinnacle of the songwriters' art. "While you probably can't bring anything totally original to a song these days you can try giving it a couple of really memorable, original lines. Then you give it the best tune you can find. You make the accompaniment really interesting and finally, you make it short and you leave some space for the listener to fill in the gaps. Randy does all that."

And if that's not mini-masterclass enough – though he admits to having spent 20 years trying to get a song right – 'Clare To Here' (which fulfils all of the Newman criteria) "took me about twenty-five minutes. One thought just unlocked the next."

It's a song about redemption and humanity and "in the end, what else is there? There's no great 'meaning of life', after all. You have to put the meaning into it. When you reflect, you realise that the most vital things are those that enhance life – by effort and whatever kind of spirituality you can achieve. By, among other things, poetry and music. It's about making something, finding a balance and a rhythm that wasn't there before. Some people chose religion, some people look to other disciplines but I suppose it's been music that suited me."

Though he's speaking from Cornwall, McTell is increasingly drawn back to the unrelenting buzz of London life. "It's changed a lot. I used to sit in the pub, observing all the old boys. Now I'm one of them. I do like to have things going on, though. When it's busy and there's all that movement, somehow it's a leveller. To stand at Oxford Circus in the evening and watch that mass of humanity, all of them carrying their own problems, disappearing down a hole in the ground to get back home, it reminds us as that, as individuals, we're hardly even a grain of sand. But you have to rise above all that and try to be productive, creative. Whenever I go into town, I come away feeling refreshed; I don't get depressed by it at all. I know it's great to have those spiritual moments, gazing out over the sea and all that, but it can get a bit solipsistic. Which is fine in itself but... it's different. I like to be among people."

And communicate with them. While he's happy to talk on, we've kept him too long from that letter. It's addressed, care of *Desert Island Discs*, to a young surgeon whose words and choice of music have so moved the great songwriter. "Occasionally, someone will come up after a show and say 'you made me cry tonight', and I'll say, 'well, there's nothing wrong with you, then is there?' It shows they've got the things in there that matter. I try to do the same, these days. If someone moves you, you should let them know." ■

McTell's new CD, *About Time*, and DVD, *Ralph McTell; 70th Birthday Concert*, are out now.

TKL

BILLY BRAGG

With his new, railroad-themed album, the legendary singer-songwriter Billy Bragg and his musical partner Joe Henry deliver a social and political commentary that affects us all. Joel McIver asks the questions

WORD: JOEL MCIVER **IMAGES:** CLOUD PR

Earlier this year Billy Bragg and his collaborator Joe Henry recorded the songs for *Shine A Light: Field Recordings From The Great American Railroad*, a haunting album of 13 blues and country standards, all related in some way to the loss of the USA's once-proud rail tradition. As you'll know if you've been following Bragg's career since he first entered the limelight in 1983 with his debut album, *Life's A Riot With Spy Vs Spy*, he's a man of hard-left political convictions, which explains the unspoken narrative beneath the music of a forgotten industry. However, the album is more than simply a vehicle for Bragg's views: it's an ensemble work that celebrates a far-off era, as well as a mighty showcase for the two musicians' acoustic instruments.

The music was also committed to hard drive in a more immersive manner than usual, with Bragg and Henry recording in waiting rooms, railway hotels, on platforms and on the actual trains that they took over their 2,700-mile journey from Chicago to Los Angeles. When we tell him that the songs sound evocative of a long-gone era, Bragg comments: "The album is about ghosts, in that the railway stations are empty now. We were down in El Paso, Texas, where the railway station is a beautiful, huge atrium which looks from the outside like a red brick Lutheran cathedral. The acoustics are just beautiful inside. It was built for thousands of people, and the people waiting for a train that day were numbered in their dozens, because there's only one train a day.

"The railway in America is bereft of passengers, but it's not bereft of trains, because the Americans transport more freight by rail than any other industrialised country. The railways work: it's not like they're forgotten. Americans just don't think of trains as passenger vehicles, because they tend to drive or fly. People who take the train often don't want to fly because they're afraid to, or because they have a medical condition, or because they don't want to show their ID to anyone. The rest are old blokes who used to work on the railway and British tourists."

You might be forgiven for categorising the album as a romantic folly created by Americana-obsessed men of a certain age – but Bragg, and his partner Joe Henry, have embarked on the project for the best of reasons. Henry, a producer and collaborator with an astounding range of musicians (Daniel Lanois, Don Cherry, Hugh Laurie, Elvis Costello, Allen Toussaint, Madonna and many others), explains: "Billy understood completely that if you go into a studio and record old songs, there's a danger that it will become a nostalgia project where you're reverently looking backwards. Our keen desire was to bring all this historic music into the present tense, into real time if you like, and understand the ways in which this music and this engagement is still a part of our lives."

Henry adds: "Billy is a historian in many ways, and he's deeply attached to the American folk tradition, as am I. He has a very clear view of this country because he stands to one side of it. We've been friends for over 20 years, and I'm interested in anything that allows us to work together. I was intrigued by the concept from the first moment he mentioned it."

Still, there's a romantic yearning in the music. As Bragg explains: "What's romantic about the railroad is that it goes at a completely different pace to the modern world. It moseys along. It's different in what they call the North-East Corridor, around Boston and Washington DC, where 85 per cent of passenger trains operate, but once you're out of that area, passenger trains give way to freight trains. On the Chicago to San Antonio route, we were the only passenger train that day. From San Antonio to Los Angeles, we were the only passenger train for *two* days. We got there at 4.30 in the morning: fortunately the coffee shop was open!"

When it came to choosing guitars for the journey, Henry looked for reliable – and ancient – tools. "I only took one guitar on the trip because I was trying to be streamlined, although normally I travel with two because I play pretty exclusively in open tunings," he says. "I play very old guitars, which don't do well if you ask them to go back and forth between different tunings. All my favourite guitars are small-bodied Gibsons from the early 1930s, mostly L-00s. They're very lightly built. I like them with 12 frets to the body, because something wonderful happens to the overtone with those short-scale guitars. But I took a Gibson 00 from 1935 with 14 frets, because it's heavier and more strongly built than the super-light 12-fret versions. It has a beefier neck than the earlier C-shaped necks that they made in 1931 and '32: maybe they were having trouble making guitars that could hold the heavier strings, so they made the tops a little heavier and the necks decidedly thicker. So that one stands up the best to going back and forth between open G and open D tunings."

Do these fantastic instruments require a lot of tender loving care, we ask? Henry: "They're not more demanding maintenance-wise than other guitars: all old acoustics require a certain amount of care. I've learned over the years which ones

can stand up to the rigours of travel better than others. But they change day by day, almost like living things. They feel different every day: that's part of what I love about them. Our guitar styles complement each other really well. I have a bit more of an orchestral approach, whereas Billy's style has more rhythm at the lowest extreme of the neck, which complements my capo playing higher up. We're not both hammering endlessly away on the same G chord."

Asked about his acoustic of choice, Bragg reveals that his choice was the opposite of Henry's: "I've got a three-year-old Gibson J45 that I bought on Denmark Street in London. I got it off the wall, played it and it sounded great. It's such a lovely guitar: you play it and you think, 'This is amazing'. I'm basically a rhythm guitarist and I mostly play in D tuning. My voice works so much better that way, because it's dropped over the last 35 years, so that's how I play now, if I'm playing acoustic guitar."

Once armed with the right guitars for the job, how did the fellows go about choosing the tracklist? After all, classic Americana tunes aren't exactly thin on the ground, even if their uniting theme has to be rail-related. "Well, it started off as an exploration of the roots of Western popular music," ponders Bragg. "If you do some research, and go back before the Beatles and find the real roots, it all comes down to 'Rock Island Line' and all the songs which came out of skiffle. It's basically Lead Belly's repertoire."

Warming to his theme, he continues: "Trains are everywhere in Western culture. Look at *Six-Five Special*, the first real rock programme for teenagers in Britain: it was named after a train. In American music, obviously you've got 'Mystery Train' by Elvis Presley, which of all his Sun sessions is the song that has the most alchemic feel: it comes out of nowhere. Whenever I listen to it, it always sounds to me like a magical moment that was fleetingly captured, as if the tape recorder was catching something that was passing by – like a train. Then there's Johnny Cash's entire repertoire. The blues is full of train songs. Jimmie Rodgers is right at the core of it: they called him 'The Singing Brakeman', and you could argue that he was the father of country music and Americana.

"For Americans, very few concepts are as evocative as that of the West, because they think it's all gone," Bragg says. "The image of the train with the cow-catcher and the big stovepipe, and so on. But it's still there: the railroad is the last bit of the old America that still functions and is still doing its job. So the romance of those songs is still a tangible experience. It was a great experience, a lot of fun."

A brush with acoustic history awaited Bragg and Henry, recalls the former: "I'd already done a recce and realised that some of the most interesting railway stations were closed at night. In San Antonio there's a really beautiful station called the Sunset Limited, built in the 1890s. It's retained its splendour but it's now used as a function room.

"We got off there and checked into the hotel where Robert Johnson recorded his songs in 1936: the Gunter Hotel. His room is still there – room 414 – and I got it! I thought to myself, 'This must mean something'. We recorded a Jimmie Rodgers song there called 'Waiting For The Train', for the sheer hell of it. It's a large, two-room corner suite. It turned out that Rodgers had a permanent suite there as well. These weird connections kept popping up."

Bragg concludes: "Trains go to places that used to be important. It's like a fossilised trip through America. I prefer driving to flying, because you see more, but I saw things on that train from different angles that I've never seen before, even a seasoned traveller like me. I just gazed out of the window and watched it go by. We were in the south-west desert and the Californian valleys, which are really just desert, although they call it lots of pretty names. The route more or less follows the Mexican border. As we were going by, we were thinking that maybe there'd be a wall there in a year or two and we wouldn't be able to see this view…"

Ah, a current – and terrifying – political reference. It would be remiss of us if we didn't ask Bragg for his thoughts on the impending American election. What is his take on Donald Trump? "We've heard so much about the American dream," he sighs. "Well, Trump is the American nightmare made flesh. All the things about 'the ugly American' that we worry about and which the Americans see in themselves, it's all of that. This is a politics of egotistical display. The Republican Party have nobody to blame but themselves. They've pandered to that no-compromise Tea Party rhetoric, and now it's totally out of their control.

"Whether we like it or not, we live in a post-ideological world. That's how a Donald Trump can get through. He has no ideology at all: in that sense, he's a bit like Mussolini. I think that ultimately Trump will lose the election and in the process destroy the Republican Party – but then I'm an optimist. So he might not lose. He might be in charge of the largest nuclear arsenal in the world!"

Perhaps the Republican Party will realise their mistake before election day, we venture? "Maybe," concedes Bragg, "but the Republican Party has a libertarian thread running through it that makes it hard for them to make a reasonable case against Trump. The trouble with the libertarians is that they think that freedom is made of one thing: liberty. It's actually made of three things, and if you don't have all three of them, you're not really free.

"Obviously liberty is the first one: the right to say what you want, as long as you're not being abusive. It's the right to express your opinion and the right to live your life as you see it. Then there's equality: the right of everybody to be able to do that, and for their rights to be respected. Liberty without equality is just privilege. Thirdly, there's what the French called *fraternité*, which translates as 'brotherhood' but for which a better translation would be 'community'. You have to recognise your responsibility to your community for your actions. Liberty doesn't mean that you're not held accountable. Without accountability, there can be no freedom. I know it seems like a paradox."

And on that ominous note, our interview is over. Let's hope the world sees sense before it's too late, or as it did for the railroad about which Bragg and Henry sing with such emotion, the tide of history may overtake us. ■

Shine A Light: Field Recordings From The Great American Railroad **comes out on 23 September on Cooking Vinyl. Info: www.billybragg.co.uk.**

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FRANK TURNER

Ahead of a record breaking tenth appearance at Reading and Leeds, we talk to the folk-punk star about the pros and cons of keeping schtum – while still making yourself heard

WORDS: GEORGE HENRY KING **IMAGES:** RICHARD ECCLESTONE

When over 12,000 strangers roared, 'It doesn't matter where you come from, it matters where you go' during Frank Turner's sold-out Wembley Arena show in 2012, the cynics who had dogged his career became irrelevant.

First of all, it was his constantly mentioned public school education that certain punk die-hards decided to take issue with. The discovery that he had once been tutored alongside royalty had led many to question his punk-rock authenticity and his anti-establishment stance.

Then his fiercely liberal view of the world saw Turner experience an even bigger backlash in 2011. After a music journalist collected and published all of his previous interview quotes regarding his political opinions in an article for *The Guardian*, he was subject to a barrage of hate mail and death threats.

At this point, Turner had not long released his most critically acclaimed album, *England Keep My Bones*, but his art and creative output, as well as his endless good deeds for charity, had been brushed aside within the mainstream media in favour of column-inches regarding his private life and his not-so-private opinions.

When we sit down with Frank prior to what will be his 1889th show in 10 years, it seems as if his performance may yet again have to take a back seat. This time though, Turner's more than okay with it.

"I feel good doing shows like this. So much of my job is relentless self-promotion and talking about myself and why everyone should think I'm amazing, so it's really nice to just put that on ice for a minute and talk about something that is considerably more important than my ego and my career."

The more important matters that he is referring to are the two charities that tonight's gig is in aid of.

Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM) is a charity dedicated to preventing male suicide and raising awareness about mental health in young men, while The Music Venue Trust prides itself in protecting the UK's live music network.

"The Music Venue Trust has done an amazing job of highlighting issues in music venues over the last couple of years, and I fronted up a campaign to get the planning law changed, which we successfully did in London. We got the Agent of Change principles adopted by Boris Johnson's administration just before

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it finished, which is a fantastic thing. Without venues and without space, art doesn't exist. And particularly if you are talking about an art form that involves communication with the crowd and quite often-loud volumes and a raucous time, it needs to happen somewhere. I think there was a moment in time where people just took it for granted and I think we are now changing that cultural attitude and I think that's great.

"One of the things about CALM that makes it easy to do good stuff with them is that the essential problem is that people don't talk about it [mental health] and simply by talking about it in any shape or form you do make a small difference. There was a cultural and social stigma against us talking about mental health, particularly among young men and the macho culture, and I think collectively as a society we have made huge strides on that in the last couple of decades."

Despite having the added responsibility this evening of being a figurehead for the charities, Turner is quick to assure us that tonight's show is just going to be him and his friends having a great time doing what they love, while trying to raise the profiles of two great causes.

"Tonight's not part of a big tour or a big production thing and I am playing *England Keep My Bones* in full, which is something that I thought would be fun to do, to make a bit of an occasion out of it for the charities. I wanted to make sure that we sold the tickets – which we did in four minutes apparently – and raised some money for the charities."

To many, life as a popular musician seems like an enviable one of free gear, world travel and unfettered access to top recording studios and musicians, but Turner is keen to use whatever fame he has to promote the work of causes close to his heart.

"I don't want to try and make out that this makes me a special flower for doing this, but to the extent that I have a platform and I can draw attention to certain issues that I think are important. I did a lot of work for Shelter and I've been working with War Child lately. I think this is the bare minimum of what I should be doing with the platform that I have. I personally try to keep it apolitical, I mean there are bands that try to be political and pursue political causes and I think that's legitimate, but that's not something I'm particularly interested in. I'm a political person in my private life, but I've taken a conscious decision to try and separate my public persona from any of my political feelings in the last few years."

In keeping with Frank's passion for supporting small venues, tonight's show is fittingly taking place at the Electric Brixton – a venue that boasts a mere 1,500 capacity. But despite having played to 20,000 at the O2 Arena, Frank is reluctant to underestimate the masses of people who will be looking back at him when he walks onstage in a couple of hours.

"It's funny that you and a few others have referred to this as a small show for me, and on some levels it is, but it's still 1,500 fucking people – that's not a small gig, that's a massive gig. For 90 per cent of the time that I have been making live music, the idea of playing to 1,500 people would have been laughable. So the fact that we can do it at short notice and sell it out is exciting to me."

Like many musicians, the UK's vast array of prestigious small venues has acted as an essential stepping-stone for Turner's ever-blossoming career, and he's quick to praise the importance of small venues and the effect that they have had on some of today's most established bands.

"I feel good doing shows like this. So much of my job is relentless self-promotion and talking about myself"

"If you want bands to play the big venues who aren't just manufactured, Simon Cowell fodder, you've got to have somewhere for those bands to inculcate and to find their identity and their sound and their audience. I mean you can talk about Radiohead, Biffy Clyro and Stereophonics – any bands like that who have come up slowly and have had time to develop who they are. Muse are a brilliant example – they did all the small venues in their time and if people like that didn't have a place to play then nothing would happen. Without those venues I would be doing something else with my life and the records I make and the records these other people make wouldn't exist, and there wouldn't be Biffy Clyro headlining Reading and Leeds, which I think is a wonderful thing. I might be biased because they are old friends, but they deserve every ounce of success. But there is an awful lot of art that will only ever exist in small venues and will only ever be played to 200 people or less. Those people aren't aiming for the big time, and if they don't get there it's not that they have failed, it's that they are playing obscure art and obscure art is equally as deserving of our time and attention."

When pressed to reveal his favourite small venues, Turner doesn't hesitate in naming The Barfly in Camden and The Joiners in Southampton - a venue that he recently helped save from closure.

Sadly though, some venues haven't been lucky enough to have an established musician fighting their corner, but Turner insists some bands do still occasionally swap the spacious arenas for the sweaty bars that helped to make them the stadium juggernauts they are today.

"I mean I'm wary of telling anyone else what to do, because if other people tell me what to do I get shirty, but I think that most of the bigger bands that I am kind of tight with do respect that [helping the small venues]. I know the Biffy guys do, for example, and even Radiohead are doing the Roundhouse, which is a small venue for them. I love what I do now and I love the level I play at, but my heart very much remains in the Barfly."

Along with Biffy, Turner himself will also be heading to Reading and Leeds Festival this year for what will be a record 10th time.

"Reading Festival was the first music festival I went to and I remember feeling like I had found my tribe. I grew up in a small town where no one was really into metal, punk or hardcore and I walked in and every single person was wearing a band T-shirt as far as the eye could see, and it was like, 'shit, these are my people – I've found them'. I'm not trying to cuss everybody else, but there are some festivals that people go to because they are 'hip' or because there is a 'cool' vibe, but Reading isn't cool, and I'm not cool, I've never been cool and I never will be cool, and people in Shoreditch are never going to fucking buy my T-shirts and think it makes them cool. Reading isn't for people like that. Reading is for people who are like, 'at 3.20pm I'm going to see four songs of this band and then at 3.45pm we are gonna be on this stage' and it's about music. It's a direct and a geeky and pure music event, and that's who I am and that's the culture I fit into."

One musician that Turner reveals didn't quite fit in with the Reading and Leeds culture, however, was 50 Cent, who was bottled off stage during his set in 2004.

"This isn't a comment on his music whatsoever, but with 50 Cent it was an interesting culture clash between the way he wanted backstage and how everyone else did, because in my world it's about camaraderie, and behind the Lock-Up Stage every year it's just mates and everybody knows everybody.

But 50 Cent wanted a clear backstage for his walk to the main stage and he wanted catering emptied before he could eat his soup and quite a lot of people were just, 'no, fuck off!' and it was just an interesting culture clash."

Although Frank Turner's last album, *Positive Songs for Negative People*, received a more lukewarm response from critics in comparison to its predecessors, it was recently re-released as a limited edition acoustic album for Record Store Day – a decision inspired by Billy Bragg.

"I'll be honest; part of the idea came from that record by Billy Bragg, *Mr Love and Justice*, where he sort of released a rock version and an acoustic version of it, and I thought that was really cool. I mean, first of all it keeps everyone happy because there are always going to be people who say they just want to hear the band stuff and then there's the more old school people who just want to hear the solo stuff. A lot of the songs are written in that format before I take them to the band and then we arrange them collectively, so it's an interesting view on that level. And even the ones that I would have written with the band, it's kind of fun to try and find a way to playing them as a soloist. There is a song called, 'Glorious You' on the record and the acoustic version is pretty different and I kind of love it and there is a little part of me that thinks that version should have been on the record, but I don't believe in 'what ifs' because it's a waste of time."

When you write and gig as much as Frank Turner does, reliable equipment is paramount to sustaining a high degree of quality throughout both your albums and your live shows. So, which of Frank's many guitars has managed to stand the test of time and feature regularly on his vast back catalogue?

"There's a guitar that I have, which I call 'Old Faithful', that was built for me by Patrick Eggle just before my second record and it's actually the guitar on the cover of the record. It's an incredible piece of wood and I've used it, here and there, on every record I've made and I've done over 1,000 shows with it, so it's fallen apart a little, but it's been fixed. I'm not overly precious about guitars, as in, I'll use whatever the producer thinks is right for the job."

The last time *Acoustic* spoke to Frank Turner, he mentioned that he was learning bluegrass finger picking. When I question him on how his lessons are going, he simply grabs his acoustic and answers my question with a seamless demonstration – all with a confident, wry grin sprawled across his face. He then declares, "I'm writing a bluegrass finger picking album" Let's just hope the punk die-hards don't take issue with that. ■

THE LONDON ACOUSTIC SHOW 2016

IN ASSOCIATION WITH ACOUSTIC MAGAZINE

CLIVE CARROLL

As Clive Carroll launches a new album ahead of his main stage and masterclass appearances at the London Acoustic Show, we sit down for a chat with the virtuoso and discover, underneath it all, he's just a really nice guy from Chelmsford

WORDS: STEPHEN BENNETT **IMAGES:** RICHARD ECCLESTONE

If you're looking for genius, the immaculate, sunlit gardens of a Cambridge college might not be a bad place to start. With his first class honours degree in composition and guitar (Trinity College, London), Clive Carroll – *Acoustic* columnist and universally acknowledged six-string superstar – probably feels right at home, and, as he's due to drag his dizzying schedule of album-launching and live-performing across the Atlantic within the next 48 hours, it's fair to say a brief interlude of Brideshead-style lawn-loitering (albeit beneath the merciless probe of an 'in-house' interrogation) seems like just the thing. We've even brought a guitar for ambient – and unsurprisingly virtuoso – noodling purposes.

As these pages can attest, Carroll's a great communicator. There's nothing lofty or precious about his approach to the guitar. In fact, he reveals a few 'guilty pleasures' with more wicked glee than any actual guilt. We'll come to them. First, like Mary Poppins, let's start at the beginning.

"I grew up surrounded by music as a kid. Both my parents played, and my dad was in a bluegrass band. He played the banjo and I was just taken by that seductive sound from the off." Duly seduced, young Clive embraced the banjo from then on, sitting in, along with his equally string-struck sister, in jam sessions and playing jigs and reels with their accordion-playing Irish mum.

"My dad was an engineer at Marconi for 40-odd years, and he got into making banjos and repairing guitars so we had instruments lying round all over the place. We started picking up a few basic chords by sitting at the back and watching gigs. I got my first banjo when I was about eight." From there, under the guidance of his dad's bandmate, Phil Morley, he was soon getting to grips with the classics: 'Cripple Creek', 'Blackberry Blossom', 'Foggy Mountain Breakdown' et al. "It was just fun. It felt good and the fact people were really encouraging only makes you want to practise more."

Before long (he'd be about nine), with the band bringing him forward for the odd solo, it became clear the lad was no one-trick pony. "The better we got on the guitars, the more we were incorporated into the band [The Jean Carroll Trio]. It was mostly Irish and country music and I learned all the standards. Because they're all fairly straightforward – in structure, at least – it was great ear-training. I'd also started playing guitar with friends at school and I found a great teacher; Hilary Camp." More of whom later. A high-decibel fate intervened. "I was given a copy of *Passion and Warfare* by Steve Vai." And so to the emergence of those not so guilty pleasures. Soon he was off to possibly the only Our Price ever to stock a copy of Joe Satriani's *Flying In a Blue Dream*. He bought it not so much in anticipation of the musical delights within but for the photo of the crazily illustrated Ibanez on the back. From banjo to shred, overnight… hardly the orthodox path to a life of acoustic exploration. Still, hooked on electricity now, Clive acquired the requisite tools and soon, teacher Hilary had found a place for her precocious protegé in her gigging rock'n'roll band. "I was really going for it, banging out the Chuck Berry's 'Sweet Little Sixteen', 'Hail! Hail! Rock'n'Roll', all the Quo-stuff, bits of Van Halen tapping." Indeed, the sickness soon spread. "In the family band, we'd be playing 'Take Me Home, Country Roads' and all of a sudden they'd get the solo from 'Eruption' at the end of the first verse. It didn't fit but it was fun."

Fun boosted by a touch of good fortune. Entranced by amplified delirium, the 16-year-old Carroll wandered into his local guitar store seeking initiation into the dark arts of the Vai/Malmsteen/Gilbert brotherhood. A card on the wall promised enlightenment so he phoned the number. The wizard was out. "I got his dad, instead. He told me, 'Guthrie's away in Oxford. I'll get him to ring you, soon as he gets back'. Anyway, Guthrie did phone so we arranged to meet up and, I must admit, I went in there feeling a bit cocky – it was hard to find like-minded players who were putting in as much practice time back then. Of course, I ended up being completely bowled over. I thought, I'm listening to one of the greatest guitar players ever – and he's from Chelmsford!"

Meanwhile, at Colchester Institute, the teenaged Carroll was now studying classical guitar seriously. "I wanted to get into writing; finding out how and why all this stuff worked. By the time I got to Trinity, I was learning about classical harmonies and structures alongside all the jazz, rock and anything else I could find."

He certainly loves to challenge what mere mortals assume to be the limited capabilities of the acoustic guitar (for evidence, check out the audaciously inventive 'Winter Carol' from the new album). As an orchestrally trained musician he's always conscious of having to work with the guitar's limitations: "That's why I like to create a piece of music first then arrange it for the guitar after that," he says. "You can't just start playing bass, rhythm and melody parts all at once. You need to know what the tune is then layer the rest of the arrangement on from there."

We move on to how a burgeoning talent moves from "awesome-but-unknown" to a recording deal and a first full album.

"At college, I was writing these heavyweight orchestral pieces – definitely not diatonic – for 'large forces'. I suppose for a break, as much as anything, I'd try and come up with short solo acoustic pieces. Anyway, John Renbourn was playing at my local folk-club so I asked if I could support him and those were the pieces I played. It never occurred to me he'd be sitting at the back watching my entire set. He came up to me at the end of the night and encouraged me to record the tunes and from there, I met Chris Newman, who runs the Old Bridge Music label, went up to his studio and that session became the first album. John Renbourn wrote the sleeve notes – you can't ask for much more than that. As with a lot of students, though, you leave college wondering what on earth you're going to do next. I'd started doing a bit of teaching when John said, how about coming on the road with me?"

In any branch of the arts, the greats reach a level of technical mastery that leaves them looking for new challenges. Clive Carroll, never one to shy away from the occasional left-field compositional swerve, loves the challenge of taking the acoustic guitar to new places – so long as the exploration stays connected to the tune and, by extension, the listener. "At Trinity, I was learning what every other instrument could do – their registers – from flutes to clarinets, French horns, double-basses... ondes Martenot, even. I was always into exploring new things, but there's an old saying that if you can't sing it, it doesn't work. Obviously that's only true for certain structured, non-impressionistic kinds of music, but if I'm working in a genre where there's a melody or a need to create a specific mood, I'll just keep singing the melody over and over till it sinks in, then start working on the next section and so on. On the road, if I come up with something and have no way of writing it down, I'll phone home and sing it into the answer machine. Then, when I get back, I can add chords and harmony. It doesn't all happen straight away. Maybe months down the line I'll think about chord substitutions. Again, it's that classic thing about not putting the furniture into the house until you've built the foundations." For Clive, composition comes in three stages: finding the tune, arranging it and then learning it. Even then, "it might be too busy so I'll start taking bits out until it sounds right."

Much of Carroll's performance material is light years beyond normal human digit-function but there's still plenty to be learned from studying how, in a relatively 'simple' piece (Neil Gow's 'Lament For The Death of his Second Wife', for example) he looks to add that extra 'something', thereby taking it to a new level.

"If you're learning a piece with a strong melody, learn it inside out. Maybe listen to a fiddle player doing it and start humming a few ornaments as you run it through your head. Then try playing it as you'd sing it. Sometimes the phrases can sound a bit distorted if you're solely focused on transferring a piece straight to the guitar. There's so much to think about, sometimes you forget to listen, so practise by taping yourself. The record-button never lies. It's hard to be objective when you're actively producing the sound but once you start to listen back and criticise what you're hearing, then you can start to progress. After that, once you know the melody inside out, you can begin to shape it, maybe switch octaves, tweak the ornamentation and harmonic changes from verse to verse. You'll always have the safety net of the melody to fall back on. When I think of the guitar from an orchestral perspective, there's so much more than just arpeggios and strumming. Imagine the piece with a more piano-style staccato or a pulse to it; vary the dynamics, add counter-melodies, triplets, drones in the bass – the possibilities are endless."

"When I think of the guitar from an orchestral perspective, there's so much more than just arpeggios and strumming"

He's explored quite a few of them on his trusty Bown OM; built in 2003 and "getting a bit temperamental these days. It's had a fair bit of stick over the years. I used to carry it in a soft case for overhead-locker convenience but one of the catches broke and I dropped it and cracked the top. Also, the back is very straight, stiff Brazilian Rosewood so in cold, dry conditions you only have to look at it and it splits. I was touring in Canada one winter and every time I checked into a hotel room I'd turn the shower on so the guitar could absorb some moisture from the steam." He wryly describes the tone as "like a fine wine", with his favoured fatter bass strings (12-56) giving it extra warmth and volume plus a slightly shortened scale length that helps when it comes to grabbing the outrageous full-chord bends he likes to showcase in his bluesier material. "You have to be really careful with the intonation, mind you."

Fortunately, Ralph Bown has just made him a new one "with the original 'proper' OM scale-length this time, so that'll be a new challenge to look forward to."

For the technically-minded, Carroll's amplification set-up features an LR Baggs dual-source system, wired in stereo through a pre-amp by the now-defunct Raven Labs. "It's the same one Danny Thompson uses. In simple terms, you get your bass from the pick-up, and your treble from the mic." It's a formula John Renbourn relied on and it certainly worked for him. As for pedals and loops, it's a case of 'all things in moderation'. "I use a bit of reverb through a Strymon Blue Sky, and I did fancy a go at the looping thing at home, for fun. I ended up writing 'Oregon' [from *Life In Colour*]. I like the idea of layering with a loop pedal but after about five minutes you get a bit tired of it. If a piece has a certain vibe I might use it. Besides, it is pretty cool to see a bit of flash now and then. People like Liszt and Paganini were doing it – albeit without the loopers – so why not? It's great to push the boundaries, but only so long as the technique doesn't start to take over from the music."

Carroll's new album, *The Furthest Tree* derives its title from a poem by Emily Dickinson and draws on a deep well of musical influences. "I'm surrounded by my CD collection and with clocking up so many miles in recent years, I've been lucky to play with guitarists from all over the world. When I toured with D'Gary from Madagascar, I couldn't believe some of the sounds he was making; so much so that, once when he left the dressing room for a minute, I had to sneak over and see what tuning he was playing in. Standard! Incredible. Similarly, there are so many great players from the Caribbean who're completely different from that whole Jansch/Renbourn/Graham thing we're so used to. It's all based round these really hypnotic rhythms. Then there's Ry Cooder, of course; the stuff with Ali Farka Touré [*Talking Timbuktu*], especially."

And then there's John Williams. "I'd always shared a passion for Renaissance music with John Renbourn. When the *Sir John Alot* album came out, even though there were elements of blues and jazz in there, the press labelled his style 'folk-baroque' and the phrase stuck. I was reading the medieval story of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' and that became the basis for a five-part suite. Renbourn and I had talked about recording a duo album at some point but sadly, that never happened, so with this piece needing a second guitar, I decided to overdub it."

The story then takes a happier turn. "About 15 years ago, someone gave my first CD to John Williams and he actually wrote me a letter wishing me all the best for the future. I was amazed. I'd met him a few times over the years and when he turned up at a gig in Cornwall, I thought, 'Okay… if there's anyone I'd love to have playing on my record…'. So I wrote and asked him, and got a reply straight back saying he'd love to. By the time we got to the studio, he'd internalised the whole thing – he didn't even need to practise it. He put a few pencil marks on the score, said 'hit record' and that was it… perfect. One of the most incredible musicians I've ever met."

Carroll's own favourite on the album, 'Thaxted Town', mixes traditional English folk, Morris music and the work of the town's most feted resident, Gustav Holst, to weave a complex yet beautifully melodic tapestry that celebrates the centenary of a tune that actually appears on its original score as 'Thaxted' but is more familiar to us as 'Jupiter' from The Planets suite. The guitarist has layered Holst's much-loved 'I Vow To Thee My Country' theme into a compositional and technical masterclass that effortlessly underpins the beautiful tune. "I recorded mainly with a pair of Bowns; my old one and an OMX that I borrowed from a friend. I used the Rob Armstrong baritone – a gift from Gordon Giltrap – on 'The Prince's Waltz' and there's a Fylde Ken Nichol Signature model on there, too."

Clive's a big fan of English lutherie and makes a point of thanking Brook Guitars, in particular, for rescuing him, not too long back (with a high-class six-string substitute) from a desperate, dead-pick-up crisis in Devon. Which, let's be honest, does sound pretty grim.

We move on to favourite players and Carroll is quick to add the name of Julian Bream to some of those above. "If I had the money to buy a ticket to see any guitar player in the world, he'd be right up there. You want to hear great music played with character and flair. It doesn't matter how good you are technically, it's about whether you mean it. That's what I want to listen to."

As the conversation drifts from Albéniz and Dowland to Hebridean psalm-singing to blues and jazz to the possibility of a live recording ("Yes, 'Clive Live' is definitely on the cards at some point"), Carroll muses on the need for the acoustic performer to think like a solo pianist in the sense that, in order to effectively communicate the music, he or she has to do all the different parts at once. Watching him do it is an education in itself and something to look forward to at September's London Acoustic Show. In fact, when, in both performance and workshop mode, we'll get to witness, up close and personal, not just the breath-taking musicianship that makes Clive Carroll one of the leading lights of the contemporary guitar world but the simple fact that above all else, he's just a really nice guy from Chelmsford. ■

***The Furthest Tree* is out now.**

© Kennerdeigh Scott

PRESTON REED

As news of Preston Reed's appearance at the London Acoustic Show is announced, we take some time to catch-up with the man widely credited with developing the percussive style of playing

WORDS: STEVE HARVEY **IMAGE:** PRESTON REED MUSIC

One of the most influential and innovative guitarists of the past quarter century, Preston Reed pretty much invented percussive guitar playing in the late 1980s, and in so doing revolutionised the way the acoustic guitar is approached, strummed and played. Employing multi-voiced grooves, polyrhythmic percussion and story-telling compositions, Reed's visionary approach fully exploits the breath-taking orchestral potential of the acoustic guitar.

Since 1979 Reed has released 15 critically acclaimed albums and performed on six continents. His long teaching experience includes The Swannanoa Gathering, where he taught Kaki King, his own week-long workshops in Scotland and his masterclass at Berklee College of Music. His 1994 instructional video, *The Guitar Of Preston Reed: Expanding The Realm Of Acoustic Playing* continues to set today's and tomorrow's top players on the path to developing their own musical voices on the instrument.

We start by asking Reed what he's been up to since last appearing at the show. "I have mostly been composing music for my next album, performing shows with my new Bailey Signature baritone, playing festivals and concerts around the UK – including the Ullapool Guitar Festival and a recent concert in London at King's Place for the Rimbaud and Verlaine Society – and doing a tour of Ireland. I also recently filmed a video of my tune 'The Last Viking' that will be up soon on my YouTube channel."

Being well known as both a performer and an educator, we ask if he has a preference for either. "I see myself as a composer first and foremost, so I honestly prefer playing live concerts to teaching. While both activities are gratifying, I find teaching to be harder work.

Playing music for concert audiences is about communicating and sharing my personal creative output. Teaching, on the other hand, is about helping other players to develop their own voice on the guitar through learning various skills and techniques. There is an implied responsibility in teaching and I take it very seriously. I feel the greatest respect for someone who entrusts me with helping them grow their skills and abilities. From that perspective, playing concerts is 'easier'!"

Looking back over nearly three decades we ask for Reed's views on how percussive playing has developed and changed. "I don't think there is one 'percussive style'," he states. "I call the style I invented in the late 1980s and 1990s integrated percussive guitar playing. It involves a cycling drum groove with other voices syncopating and interacting with it. My own work is evolving all the time and often includes compositions that are not percussive."

Looking forward to the London Acoustic Show, we ask for a sneak preview of what show visitors can expect. "In the masterclass I will teach my approach and an attempt to impart my vision of composing and playing music on acoustic guitar. The class will focus on the compositions, techniques and the thinking behind integrated percussive guitar playing. I want to make the class interactive too, so I will invite participants to join in with a dialogue about composing music on the guitar, developing new skills and techniques, the future of a solo acoustic guitar playing and lots more." And for the main performance? "My concert will include a balance of selections from my live concert repertoire as well as new compositions that will be part of my next album to be released 2017."

Having been playing and performing extensively for so long, we wonder what it is that enables Preston to stay motivated. "I love composing music on the guitar. I also thrive on the interactive communication that happens with audiences when I perform my music. With regard to teaching, I get great gratification from helping players to expand their skills and develop their own sound on the guitar."

Over the course of his career, Reed has played a range of guitars, perhaps most famously an Ovation. Recent years, however, have seen him become more involved with UK-based luthier, Mark Bailey. A Preston Reed signature model was launched in 2013. In discussing guitars he will bring to the Acoustic Show, Reed confirmed: "I will be bringing my two Bailey Preston Reed signature acoustics – a jumbo and the new baritone Mark built for me last year. It's a stunning example of Mark's work which incorporates an inlay material that has never been used in a guitar before." ■

Advance tickets for the London Acoustic Show can be purchased via ***www.londonacousticshow.com***

THE LONDON ACOUSTIC SHOW 2016

IN ASSOCIATION WITH **ACOUSTIC MAGAZINE**

Preston will be appearing at the London Acoustic Show on Sunday 11 September. He'll be holding a masterclass at 12.15pm, and will perform on the main stage at 3.00pm.

© Kennerdeigh Scott

ROB LYNCH

Troubadour Rob Lynch reflects on 10 years as a solo artist as he releases his second album Baby, I'm A Runaway

WORDS: SEAN REID **IMAGE PROVIDED BY:** MAJOR

From his beginnings as Lost On Campus to his well-appreciated debut full-length, *All These Nights In Bars Will Somehow Save My Soul*, under his own name, Rob Lynch has been on an intriguing journey for the past 10 years. Having spent a majority of that time as a solo artist, his second album, *Baby, I'm A Runaway*, sees him turning a page and embracing the full-band sound that he has been developing on the road for the best part of two years.

"It's a more cohesive effort. We rehearsed and wrote the songs together as a four-piece. We've kind of moved away from the acoustic folk-pop scene I was pushed into. This is much more a pop-rock record with an acoustic guitar at the helm," says Lynch when we caught up with him at the Slam Dunk festival in Leeds.

The album sees Lynch work closely with his touring band: guitarist Jonny Ward, bassist Tom Aylott, drummer Charlie Thomas, as well as reuniting with producer Sam Duckworth. Nevertheless, the songs on offer retain a deeply personal, introspective touch despite the stylistically buoyant approach.

"I like honesty in the music I listen to, not just throwaway statements or lines. We tried to go down a line of writing songs that sound upbeat, even if the subject matter isn't overly upbeat" says Lynch. "It comes from a very different place than the first record. That was seven years of songwriting, this has been a year and a half, so my head has been in a different space."

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That lyrical honesty has been a mainstay throughout Lynch's career, something he has in common with many of his key lyrical influences, including Elliot Smith, Sufjan Stevens, Chris Carrabba and, more recently, Jason Isbell. Musically, however, *Baby, I'm A Runaway* sees Lynch revisit his teenage years for inspiration, citing Semisonic, Third Eye Blind and Hanson as influences.

"What we're going for is that poppy, catchy sound, but one that sounds like a band as well. Hopefully, we can take a leaf out of those bands' books and have the same type of career."

Lynch didn't pick up a guitar until his 18th birthday, and although his parents questioned his decision, he showed determination. "I got a cheap guitar from my parents. We went to the music shop on my birthday, and they questioned if I really wanted it. I said to them I would teach myself, learn how to sing and write songs. I got it and then I really got into playing. I'm all self-taught and haven't looked back since. 12 years on and I'm still doing it, so it must have worked out OK."

Lynch, like most guitarists, is always looking to improve, yet admits to slipping back into old habits. "Whenever I'm writing I think, 'I'm going to try something different', but you somehow find yourself falling back into the same routine. But if you can push yourself to just change a little bit each time, you soon realise that you're building up an arsenal of different strumming patterns or picking techniques," he says. "You've always got to try and improve because you're never going to be as good as you can be."

"It's a more cohesive effort – Baby, I'm A Runaway is a pop-rock record with an acoustic guitar at the helm"

From his early Lost On Campus outings to reverting to his own name, Lynch hasn't shied away from life on the road. From travelling up and down the United Kingdom and Germany numerous times, to venturing Stateside for the mammoth punk rock summer camp known as the Vans Warped Tour, Lynch has built up the road miles all the while accompanied by his trusty Takamine TF250SMCSB.

"I've used it for the past four years. I should treat her better. She's got a big jumbo body and I get to take her on trains and planes and in vans and cars, but she can look after herself. She's just sturdy. It's quite big, which is great for me, as I'm not a small person. It's really heavy as well, but for the way that I tour, which is however I need to get somewhere, it's durable and resistant. It's got a really rich body in its sound, which for bigger venues really fills the room. It hasn't got a dainty sound. It's got a really decent low end to it," says Lynch on the now discontinued model.

Although *Baby, I'm A Runaway* will just have been released as you read this, and Lynch undoubtedly has more time on the road lined up, Lynch is prepping for LP3: "I'm already writing for the next thing now. I always want to stay busy. I always want to stay one step ahead of the game." ■

***Baby, I'm A Runaway* is out now on Xtra Mile Recordings.**

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BOULDER CREEK ERJ-7N & ECRM-6N

US-made Boulder Creek guitars have always been well respected albeit priced out of the reach of many. New Chinese-made models, however, are set to make the brand more affordable…

WORDS: SAM WISE **IMAGES:** RICHARD ECCLESTONE

Boulder Creek guitars are different. It's obvious from the first glance; the lack of a conventional soundhole gives it away, but as we will see, the innovation runs much deeper. Boulder Creek is a small, family-owned business that has focused on innovative design ideas to reduce feedback and improve tone. Until recently, the cost of their handmade instruments has left them out of the reach of most guitarists. The Solitaire Series, however, made in China, boast the same innovative features, but without the high manufacturing costs and exotic tonewoods that make the USA models significantly more expensive. So now there's a Boulder Creek to suit almost every pocket, shouldn't we find out a little more about them?

Our two review models have a lot in common, but a fair amount also divides the enormous jumbo from the comparatively petite OM. Let's start with the striking jumbo. It's broad, deep and tall, dwarfing the OM as they stand together. It's notable for being so pale; a really good slice of solid spruce comprises the formidable top, finely and evenly grained, with a lot of luscious cross silking. The tiny soundhole in the upper right bout is ringed with abalone, which is also the material of the purfling, and the top is bound in what looks like maple. Back and sides are laminate, veneered in beautifully flamed maple, with the shoulder carrying a head unit for the pickup system, and the side of the lower bout wearing a larger soundport, ringed in what seems to be ABS. Back on the top, there's a fairly pale rosewood bridge with a fully compensated plastic bridge and black plastic bridge pins. The neck and fingerboard are both maple, but are separate from each other.

The 20-fret fingerboard is bound in a cream-coloured plastic and has simple black inlays with a good quality plastic nut at the top. The lightning-strike headstock is faced in maple, with both binding and purfling, and a shadowed Boulder Creek logo for an art deco effect. It carries Grover tuning machines with chrome steel kidney buttons. Like it or hate it, the ERJ-

7N is a unique looking guitar, grabbing your attention from the first glance, and we love the pale look of the instrument.

The OM is, by comparison, all laminate, with a koa veneer on both back and sides of its much smaller body. Compared to the Jumbo it's positively dinky, slim and approachable. The decoration and equipment is identical but for some minor differences; namely a bound rosewood fingerboard, koa faced headstock, and gold Grovers with black buttons. Overall it is, again, a good-looking guitar, and while it's almost a shrinking violet next to the bold Jumbo, it is original and eye-catching.

There is even more innovation under the soundboard, where Boulder Creek's Suspended Bracing System is radically different from other guitars. There is a simple X across the centre of the soundboard, but rather than all the other bracing that a Martin-style guitar will have, the Boulder Creeks have two metal 'tone bars', which don't touch the soundboard, but attach to braces at the top and bottom of it, and under the bridge. This means that there is much less direct contact to the top, making, theoretically, much more vibration possible. Boulder Creek also makes its own pickup system, which locates the battery in the output plate, along with both XLR and ¼" jack sockets, which can be used separately or at the same time, allowing you to split the signal over two amps, straight into the PA with no DI box. The head unit has a tuner, volume control, three-band equaliser, a brilliance control and a phase switch to eliminate hum.

Quality wise, these are near perfect; perhaps the fret dressing on the jumbo isn't quite flawless, but these are well-assembled, high-quality guitars that belie China's rapidly waning reputation for poor quality.

The jumbo is enormous, and the player should be prepared for that; compared to another jumbo and a dreadnought we had on hand, it is significantly bigger; that is in the Gibson SJ range, but perhaps even deeper than a super jumbo. If you can get your arms round it, however, the rewards are immense. The neck, despite a gloss finish, isn't remotely sticky, the action is easygoing without risking buzz and it's an easy player (for big players). The tone, also, considerably surpassed our expectations; of all the tonewoods, maple is the easiest to replace with laminate, delivering a lot of fundamental tone and not much warmth or sympathetic harmonics, but, in exchange, plenty of projection and volume.

A £1,000 instrument with laminate back and sides needs to be really good to justify the price, but wow, the Boulder Creek really does. What particularly impresses is the dynamic range; the jumbo is super-loud if you drive it hard, but play with delicacy and it answers just as delicately. Fingerstyle produces bright, fresh trebles that are loud without being at all aggressive or grating, underpinned by a midrange that projects bright and clear, and a powerful platform of focused bass. Strum gently and you have a similar tonal footprint, bright and shimmering, loud in a delicate, unassuming way.

Start to dig in and there is an extraordinary amount of headroom. Whether it's the enormous top, the woods, the bracing or the soundhole firing the air right at you we can't be sure, but this guitar is loud – though it retains incredible

BOULDER CREEK ERJ-7N

NEED TO KNOW

Manufacturer: Boulder Creek Musical Instruments
Model: ERJ-7N
RRP: £799
Body Size: Jumbo
Made In: China
Top: Solid spruce
Back and Sides: Laminated flamed maple
Bridge: Rosewood
Neck: Maple
Fingerboard: Maple
Frets: Medium wire
Tuners: Grover 18:1
Nut Width: 1 11/16"
Scale Length: 25 5/8"
Onboard Electrics: Boulder Creek AB4-T
Strings Fitted: D'Addario EXP
Gig Bag/Case Included: None

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Stunning unique looks, bright dynamic tone
Cons: Pickup can't quite capture the tone
Overall: A really great guitar, maybe even a category killer at this price

ACOUSTIC RATING

Sound Quality: ★★★★½
Build Quality: ★★★★★
Value for Money: ★★★★★
5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless
4 Stars: Excellent, hard to beat
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor

CONTACT DETAILS

www.bouldercreekguitars.com

> ***"Bluegrass licks that require you to hit hard on a regular guitar really came to life with a lighter touch on this guitar"***

clarity even when played really hard. Indeed, the sheer volume levels available encouraged us to play with a lighter touch and more dynamics, and the results were amazing. Bluegrass licks that require you to hit hard on a regular guitar really came to life with a lighter touch on this guitar, and we loved it. If we had to level a criticism, we'd suggest that you may find that the tone becomes a little brash and over bright when you're right at the limit, but you will rarely want to do that, such is the available volume.

Plugging in revealed that, good though the pickup system is, it can't quite reproduce the majesty of the unplugged tone. The guitar still sounds great, and recognisable as the bright and shimmering tone monster it is, but the wonderful dynamics are slightly blunted. Boulder Creek's claim that the lack of soundhole makes the guitar feedback resistant is borne out; we turned the guitar up to the point that everyone in the building was complaining, and couldn't persuade it to feed back, whereas our reference guitars would do so at a much lower volume.

The OM, unfortunately, isn't able to compete with the Jumbo, and given its laminated top, perhaps that's not surprising. Physically, it's a

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LÂG GUITARS

BOULDER CREEK ECRM-6N

NEED TO KNOW

Manufacturer: Boulder Creek Musical Instruments
Model: ECRM6-N
RRP: £849
Body Size: Orchestra model
Made In: China
Top: Laminated koa
Back and Sides: Laminated koa
Bridge: Rosewood
Neck: Mahogany
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Frets: Medium wire
Tuners: Grover 18:1
Nut Width: 1 11/16"
Scale Length: 25 5/8"
Onboard Electrics: Boulder Creek AB4-T
Strings Fitted: D'Addario EXP
Gig Bag/Case Included: None

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Great looking guitar, nice flexible plugged in tone
Cons: Unplugged tone lacking compared to the jumbo
Overall: A good flexible guitar, but is overshadowed by its sibling

ACOUSTIC RATING

Sound Quality: ★★★☆☆
Build Quality: ★★★★☆
Value for Money: ★★★★☆
5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless
4 Stars: Excellent, hard to beat
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor

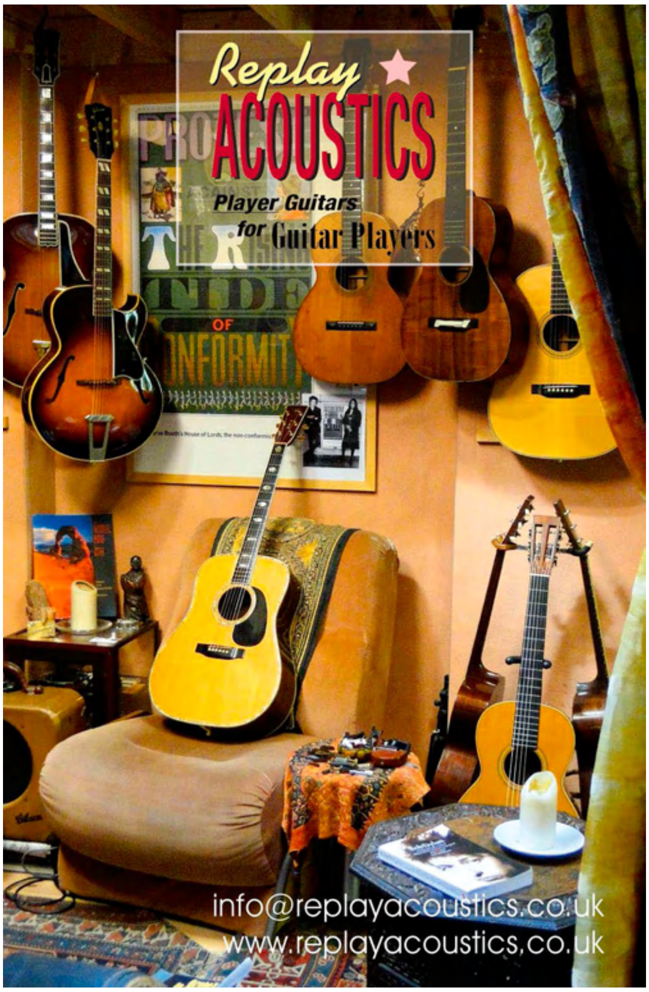
CONTACT DETAILS

www.bouldercreekguitars.com

> ***"Plugged in, this would make an excellent performance guitar for anyone"***

much more accommodating guitar; slimmer in the waist and a lot shallower; nobody is going to struggle with this guitar in the way that a small framed person might with the jumbo. Sonically, it's much quieter (soundboard size, depth and top material all mitigate for this), and with neither the top end sparkle nor the low end punch of its stable-mate. That's not to say it's a poor tone, it just pales in comparison to its bigger sister's glories. Plug it in, however, and it comes to life; tweak the EQ to add a little top and bass, and you have a great sounding guitar. There is an argument made in some quarters that laminate is better for plugged-in playing, as it resists feedback better and delivers a more neutral tone for the EQ to shape. Plugged in, this would make an excellent performance guitar for anyone.

This is a tale of two levels. The OM is a decent guitar, playable, handsome and with excellent plugged in tone. The Jumbo, however, is truly wonderful; it has much more of its own character, which will perhaps not appeal to everyone, but many will find it a revelation. If you're looking for a bright, punchy and percussive jumbo, do not put your money down until you've played this – it's truly spectacular. ■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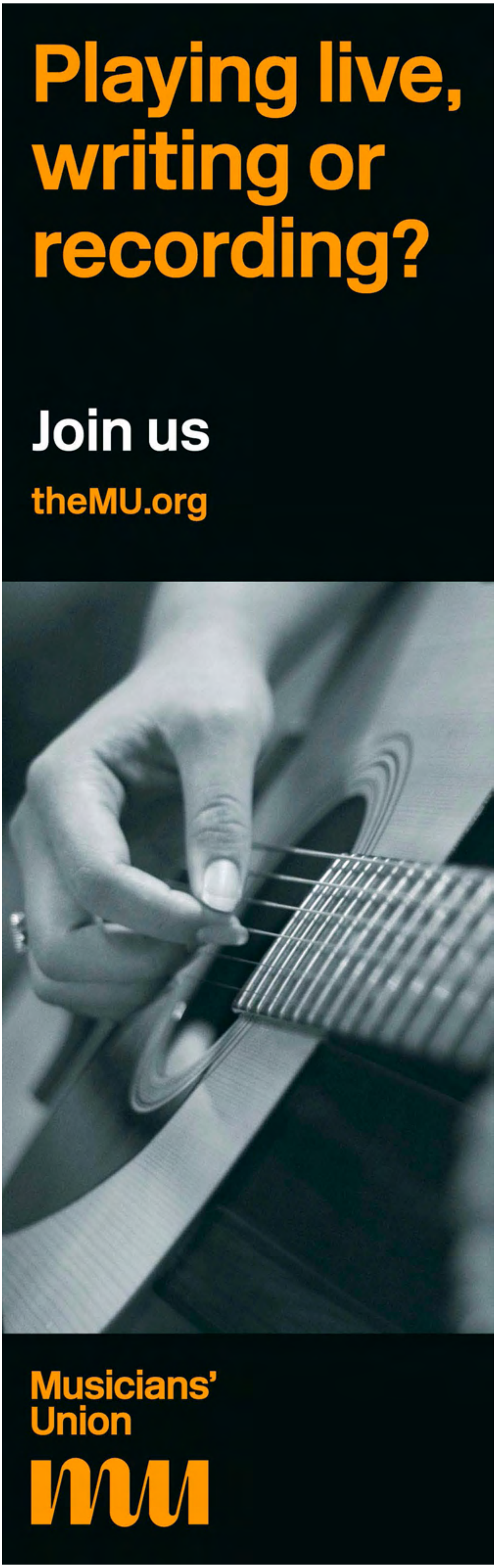
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ADMIRA VIRTUOSO EC

Everyone should own at least one nylon string acoustic, but where to start? Ollie McGhie examines a new Admira classical-based instrument and learns that everything's not quite as it would first appear

WORDS: OLLIE MCGHIE **IMAGES:** RICHARD ECCLESTONE

In over 65 years of guitar-making, Admira has cornered the market for traditionally made Spanish guitars that are both affordable and reasonable quality. Prices start from £105 for beginner and go up to £529 – ideal for beginners and aspiring musicians. They also attract seasoned professionals, including the award-winning guitarist-composer Antonio Forcione. All models are handcrafted at Admira's workshops in Zarautz, northern Spain.

The guitar that arrives on my doorstep in England's rainy West Country is the Admira Virtuoso EC which, as its name suggests, is aimed at the more advanced player. Off the starting block, the guitar appears smart, clean and sleek. It comes with a solid cedar top which has an even amber grain running the length of it against a finely dappled background; rich, dark rosewood back and sides (and bridge) are accentuated by white fibre-coloured purfling and ebony binding.

Where this model differs from the traditional classical model is in the cutaway and the integration of a Shadow 5Plus pre-amp system with an endpin output connector; two clear signs this guitar is meant for more than practising in your bedroom. The rosette around the soundhole is a muted yellow and black design, and the tuners glimmer in Lyre Design Pearloid gold, mirroring the Admira 'A' logo on the headstock. The guitar also features the classic Spanish heel, a symbol of its heritage.

It's finished with a smart gloss, so you'll want to keep this one buffed up. However, on inspection, I find the join between the neck, fingerboard and body of the guitar has an untidy glue seal, a small blemish in the overall appearance. Given Admira's reputation as makers of guitars which inspire people to take up the instrument and learn new music, they can be forgiven for this minor misdemeanour.

As you can expect from a cedar-topped instrument, this guitar has a warm, rounded sound, which retains some clarity thanks to the rosewood back and sides. It projects well, with good volume that doesn't diminish the warmth of the sound, even before any kind of amplification. Classical purists might criticise the cutaway as compromising the volume and/or quality of sound but this instrument has different intentions.

"The left hand can really attack the upper register – you never feel you have to hold back"

Admira's UK distributor, Barnes & Mullins, is currently positioning Admira guitars for the wider market. Importantly, they are nylon stringed guitars rather than classicals, though many of their specs might lead you to think of them as the latter. As we have already seen, in appearance alone, this guitar certainly wants to be more than that. This is something to bear in mind when playing this instrument.

The right-hand has plenty of space for fingerstyle work, be it folk, classical or jazz. If the steel-strung acoustic is all you know, then the relatively higher action here is certainly going to take some getting used to. For the player who uses nails, the warm tone which comes from playing over the soundhole and the tail end of the fret board contrasts well with the crisp, harsher sound when playing down by the bridge. A definite plus for a classical repertoire.

In comparison with one of Admira's other models – the A5, which also comes with a solid cedar top and rosewood back and sides – the EC Virtuoso is noticeably heavier in weight. I checked with the distributors and they confirmed that the A5 is 1.5kg, whereas the EC Virtuoso is 1.8kg. A large part of the reason for this is the neck. It is made from a triptych of woods: African mahogany for the main part, sandwiched by a rosewood fingerboard and an additional strip of ebony running almost the entire length of the reverse side for extra strength. You might think this weight would unbalance the instrument, but sitting in the standard 'classical' position it feels good to know this is an instrument of substance you're playing. You also feel you can really lean in for those more introspective and passionate moments.

Measuring 52mm at the first fret and 60mm at the 12th fret the fingerboard is the standard classical width. The cutaway is a particularly useful feature, which works well with the heavy-duty neck, meaning the left hand can really attack the upper register – you never feel you have to hold back, which encourages you to try all manner of improvisation and soloing, which is great for jazz and blues playing. The tone around the 12th fret on the top strings is sweet and the harmonics project with a surprisingly clear resonance, especially when embellished with subtle left-hand vibrato. This is complemented by a strong bass to mid-range of tone throughout the fretboard.

The Shadow 5Plus pre-amp system includes the 'NanoFlex' pickup, which captures vibrations from the guitar's wooden structure as well as the strings. Combined with manual command over everything from bass to treble and a phase switch, which helps combat evil

"This is a guitar which wants to go places – making it ideal for the gigging guitarist"

ADMIRA VIRTUOSO EC

NEED TO KNOW

Manufacturer: Admira
Model: Virtuoso EC
RRP: £529
Body Size: 4/4 electro cutaway
Made In: Spain
Top: Solid cedar
Back and Sides: Rosewood
Bridge: Rosewood
Neck: African mahogany
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Frets: 19
Tuners: Lyre Gold
Nut Width: 50mm
Scale Length: 650mm
Onboard Electrics: Shadow 5Plus
Strings Fitted: Factory
Gig Bag/Case Included: No

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: A smart instrument with a warm tone and intriguing onboard electrics
Cons: Some untidy glue work; no gig bag
Overall: This nylon-stringed instrument brings traditional Spanish handcraft to a wider demographic of players and selection of music, but it doesn't want to stray too far from its roots

ACOUSTIC RATING

Sound Quality: ★★★★☆
Build Quality: ★★★★☆
Value for Money: ★★★★½
5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless
4 Stars: Excellent, hard to beat
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor

CONTACT DETAILS

www.admiraguitars.co.uk

feedback, you have a system that can take charge of your electro-acoustic performance.

While the onboard electrics for this model are made by Shadow it is worth noting that other recent models from Admira now feature Fishman Clàsica Blend pickups. Barnes & Mullins describes this guitar as being 'generally inspired by the original non-electro model. The designs are all tailored to make their classical guitars as accessible and easy to play for both new and established players.'

At £529, the EC Virtuoso is in the mid-range budget: a reasonable price given the high grades of woods used for its construction and the sensitive on-board electrics. It is still good value for money even though the guitar doesn't include a case. With the addition of the end pin, guitarists can play this instrument while on the move. This is a guitar which wants to go places (making it ideal for the gigging guitarist) so all protective measures are most welcome. But Admira has succeeded in crafting a guitar that provides enough versatility of sound to capture the moods of multiple musical genres, though with an obvious leaning towards the classical. It has a set-up that encourages ease of use so it won't be long until you're wanting to test this with amplification. This guitar is aimed at the more advanced player but there's no reason why intermediates and enthusiastic beginners can't give it a try. ■

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14715 - Faith FRSB45 Drop Dreadnought
6975 - Fender CD60, Black
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15501 - Fender CF60 Folk
15197 - Fender PM1 Standard Dreadnought, Natural
15244 - Fender PM2 Standard Parlour Guitar, Nat
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12652 - Lakewood D14 Dreadnought Acoustic Guitar
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15310 - Martin 00015M Mahogany Acoustic, Used
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5702 - Martin D28 Dreadnought, Natural
6008 - Martin D35 Dreadnought, Natural
5013 - Martin D41 Dreadnought, Natural
7115 - Martin LX1 Little Martin
15258 - Rainsong NP12 Nylon Parlour Guitar
11149 - Seagull Excursion Natural Folk SG
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12437 - Yairi FY84 OM Folk Acoustic Guitar
12428 - Yairi Rag 65 Small Parlour Guitar
5632 - Yamaha F310 Dreadnought, Natural
6964 - Yamaha FG700S Acoustic Guitar
13387 - Yamaha FG720S Yamaha FG720S
14483 - Yamaha FS720S Acoustic, Black

6 String Electro Acoustics

10918 - Breedlove USA Gold D/SRE
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14689 - Breedlove Revival DR Deluxe
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7024 - Fender CD60CE, Dreadnought, Electro, Nat
10320 - Fender CD60CE Mahogany Electro Acoustic
14732 - Fender CJ290SCE Jumbo Maple With Case
15280 - Fender PM1 Deluxe, Vintage Sunburst
15355 - Fender PM3 Dlx Triple-0 Vintage Sunburst
14744 - Fender Sonoran SCE Left-hand Dreadnought
14745 - Fender Sonoran SCE Thinline, Black
6929 - Fender Stratacoustic Electro Acoustic Bk
9700 - Gibson J45 Custom Electro Acoustic
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12702 - Maestro Raffles IR-CSB R Small Jumbo Electro
12790 - Maestro Raffles MDT Small Jumbo Electro
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14817 - Maestro Raffles MR-CSB-A Fanned Frets
12792 - Maestro Rosetta MDT Dreadnought Electro
12793 - Maestro Rosetta MRDT Dreadnought Electro
13212 - Maestro Singa Flame Maple Custom Electro
14814 - Maestro Singa M-CSB-C All Solid MedJumbo
13712 - Maestro Singa MR-CSB A Custom Jumbo
13209 - Maestro Singa MRDT Medium Jumbo Electro
13711 - Maestro Singa O-CSB Custom Medium Jumbo
14815 - Maestro Singa WE-CSB-A Medium Jumbo
13718 - Maestro Victoria with fitted LR Baggs
13207 - Maestro Victoria with fitted LR Baggs
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15474 - Martin & Co DXAE Electro Acoustic
15164 - Martin 000RS1, Secondhand
14479 - Martin 000RSGT Electro Acoustic Guitar
8277 - Martin DC15ME Dreadnought Cutaway
15487 - Martin DCPA4 Electro Acoustic, Shaded
14780 - Martin DJR Dreadnought Junior
14477 - Martin DRS2 Electro Acoustic Guitar
14478 - Martin DRSGT Electro Acoustic Guitar
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13674 - Martin OMXAE Electro Acoustic, Black
12439 - Northwood Custom Koa 80D Electro
12438 - Northwood Custom Myrtle 80 Series D-nought
14913 - PJ Eggle Linville Cutaway Elec/Acoustic
14914 - PJ Eggle Linville Electro Acoustic
14915 - PJ Eggle Parlour Electro Acoustic
14926 - PJ Eggle Saulda Cutaway Elec/Acoustic
14927 - PJ Eggle Saulda Elec/Acoustic
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10038 - RainSong BI-WS1000N2 Black Ice Graphite
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15259 - Rainsong SMCX Smokey Series
15257 - Rainsong SMH Smokey Hybrid
5257 - Satori YD18EQ, Dreadnought Electro, Nat
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14954 - Tanglewood EvolutionTSFCE Sunburst Gloss
14951 - Tanglewood TSF CE White
13459 - Tanglewood TW115 SSCE
4187 - Tanglewood TW40 OANE Orchestra
15498 - Tanglewood TW5 Winterleaf, Black
15497 - Tanglewood TW5 Winterleaf, Burgandy
15495 - Tanglewood TW5 Winterleaf, Whiskey Gloss
15496 - Tanglewood TW5 Winterleaf, White
14947 - Tanglewood TWCR O Crossroads
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14419 - Vintage Pilgrim VPG900 Mayflower Deluxe
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14427 - Yamaha APX1000 Slimline Guitar, Natural
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14492 - Yamaha CPX1000 Electro Acoustic, Natural
6961 - Yamaha CPX700 Electro Acoustic Sandburst
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14422 - Yamaha FGX720SC, Natural
14421 - Yamaha FJX720SC Electro, Sunburst
14420 - Yamaha FX310A Guitar, Natural
6966 - Yamaha FX370C Dreadnought Electro, Black
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8141 - Yamaha SLG110S Silent Steel String Guitar
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12761 - Ramirez SP Classical Guitar
6441 - Roberto C2 Classical Guitar
10999 - Westcoast Student 4/4 Classical, Red
14720 - Yamaha C40II Full Size Classical Guitar
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12 Strings

13865 - Breedlove Pursuit 12 String Acoustic
13553 - Eko Vintage Ranger 12 in Black
14525 - Guild JF230-AB USA-Made, c1997
10991 - Tanglewood TRD12 Lefty 12 , Nat
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13475 - Tanglewood TW145 12 SS CE
14398 - Vintage VE2000GG12 Giltrap 12-String
14349 - Vintage VE8000PB-12 Paul Brett 12-

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8826 - Ashbury AM-325 Octave Mandola
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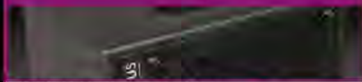
15442 - Ashbury Rathlin Irish Bouzouki
13527 - Blue Moon BB15 Bouzouki GR33001
15435 - Blue Moon Irish Bouzouki, Pear Shape
14028 - Breedlove Crossover OO O Hole , Black
14500 - Breedlove Crossover Mandolin, VV
12568 - Fender Concert Tone "F" 63S Mandolin
14741 - Fender Concert Tone Mandolin "A" 53S
12540 - Fender FM63SE Electro Acoustic Mandolin
9240 - Jimmy Moon A2 Acoustic Mandolin, Natural
4564 - Jimmy Moon A Plus Electro Bouzouki, Nat
4553 - Jimmy Moon Standard Mandolin
9430 - Ozark Flat Back Bouzouki
15482 - Stagg M20 Mandolin Sunburst
8315 - Westcoast M20 Mandolin Sunburst
12347 - Westcoast M20S Mandolin Sunburst

Acoustic Amplification



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15059 - Marshall AS50D RED - 50W, 2x8"
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6505 - Roland AC60 Acoustic Amp - 30w, 2x6.5
9383 - Roland AC60 Acoustic Guitar Combo, RW
5597 - Roland AC90 - 90W, 2x8"
5574 - Roland Cube Street 2.5+2.5W, 6.5
14371 - MOBILE AC Acoustic Chorus, Portable Amp
13018 - Tanglewood T3 30W Acoustic Amplifier
8108 - Tanglewood T6, 60W
14941 - Tanglewood TBA5 5 Watt Acoustic Amp
13471 - Tanglewood TXS Bass Sub
10937 - Yamaha THR5A Acoustic Amp

Ukuleles

12564 - Barnes & Mullins BJ306 6-String Banjo
4371 - Barnes & Mullins UBJ1 Banjo Ukulele
14820 - Baton Rouge Tenor Uke Cutaway, LEFTY
15147 - Blue Moon Tenor Ukulele Pear-Shaped
15398 - Deering Goodtime Tenor Banjo Ukulele
14557 - Deering Goodtime Ukulele Banjo
9081 - Fender Mino'Aka Concert Ukulele
12800 - Kala KA-BNJ/BK-C Concert Banjo Ukulele
9345 - Kala U Bass Electro Ac In Solid Mahogany
8127 - Kala U Bass in Mahogany
4722 - Kala U-Bass 2 Electro Acoustic Ukulele
13978 - Laka Concert Ukulele with GigBag
13979 - Laka Soprano Ukulele with Case
10372 - Magic Fluke M10 Concert Ukulele, Natural
13883 - Magic Fluke M30 Flea Sop Uke, Mahogany
15394 - Magic Fluke M90W Firefly Walnut BanjoUke
14866 - Magic Fluke Timber Elec. Bass, Fretless
8128 - Martin S1 Soprano Ukulele with Gig Bag
15457 - Mya-Moe USA Beansprout Banjo Uke, Used
13679 - Nukulele "Abbots Digit" Bottle Ukulele
13684 - Nukulele Autumn Gold Bottle Ukulele
13680 - Nukulele "Brown Ale" Bottle Ukulele
13681 - Nukulele "Helles Bier" Bottle Ukulele
13683 - Nukulele Lemonade Bottle Ukulele
13682 - Nukulele Slainte Bottle Ukulele
8515 - Ohana BK20 Baritone Ukulele
12610 - Ohana BK22 Baritone Ukulele
12609 - Ohana BKB35E Bass Ukulele
13633 - Ohana CK15BK Concert Ukulele, Black
13634 - Ohana CK15BL Concert Ukulele, Blue
12605 - Ohana CK15Z Concert Ukulele
9050 - Ohana CK20CE Concert Uke
8513 - Ohana CK50MG Concert Ukulele
8508 - Ohana PK10S Soprano Ukulele Pineapple
8516 - Ohana PK25G Soprano Ukulele Pineapple
13637 - Ohana SK10GN Soprano Uke, Matte Green
13636 - Ohana SK10YW Soprano Uke, Matte Yellow
13644 - Ohana SK12 Soprano Ukulele
4711 - Ohana SK20S Soprano Ukulele Uke
14210 - Ohana SK21M Premium Mahogany Sop.
13626 - Ohana SK22 Soprano Ukulele
8517 - Ohana SK22Z Sop Ukulele Zebrawood B&S
13642 - Ohana SK23 Soprano Ukulele
4710 - Ohana SK25 Soprano Ukulele
14211 - Ohana SK70BA Spruce & Morinda Sop Uke
14508 - Ohana SK70L Soprano Ukulele
14212 - Ohana SK70WG Soprano Uke, Willow B & S
12390 - Ohana Soprano Uke Gig Bag
13311 - Ohana Concert Uke Gig Bag
13312 - Ohana Tenor Uke Gig Bag
13310 - Ohana Baritone Uke Gig Bag
5009 - Ozark Ukulele Banjo
12740 - ResoVille Weeki Wachee Resonator Ukulele
10384 - Risa Electric Soprano Ukulele, UKS363MP
10385 - Risa UKS385MP Solid Concert Electro Uke
15476 - Risa Tenor Ukulele Electric Tenor-Uke
10424 - Uluru Lehua I Soprano Ukulele
15385 - Vintage Banjo Ukulele, Used
12376 - Yamaha GL1 Guitalele

Travel & Tenor Guitars

13550 - Eko Mini Evo EQ Travel Guitar In Natural
15344 - Faith Nomad Mini Neptune
15345 - Faith Nomad Mini Saturn
15500 - Fender Sonoran 3/4 Mini Acoustic Guitar
14473 - Luna Safari Henna 3/4 Size Travel Guitar
14472 - Luna Safari Starry Night 3/4 Travel Guitar
15432 - Luna Safari Tattoo
5835 - Martin Backpacker Acoustic Travel Guitar
13324 - Martin LX Red Little Martin
7115 - Martin LX1 Little Martin
7320 - Martin LX1E, Electro Travel Guitar
15439 - Martin LXK2 Little Martin Travel Guitar
9588 - Tanglewood TW15 Baby All Solid Travel
14628 - Tanglewood TWJLJ, Travel Guitar
14522 - Yamaha SLG200S Silent Guitar, Steel
8846 - Ashbury AT-14 Tenor Guitar
8851 - Ashbury AT24 Tenor Guitar
15434 - Ashbury Tenor Guitar, Flamed Oak
15503 - Dimavery RS300 Resonator Guitar, Used
14615 - Dobro, circa 1975, Original Vintage
12613 - Fender FR50CE Cutaway Electro Resonator
14530 - Gibson Dobro USA Made Resonator, Used
12737 - ResoVille Parkville MS12 Single Cone Nic
12730 - ResoVille Burbank MT12 Tri-Cone, Nickel
12732 - ResoVille Burbank MT12 Tri-Cone, Gold
12731 - ResoVille Burbank MT12 Tri-Cone, Red Cop
13244 - ResoVille Edgewood WS12R Maple Parlor

For full guitar details, pricing and photos, enter the number next to each guitar model into our SKU search facility on the website.

MICHAUD MADE OM-R

Joel Michaud is a hugely talented luthier based in British Columbia. His OM-R is a modern, stylish take on Martin's original OM body shape, but adorned with what can only be described as 'jewellery'...

WORDS: STEPHEN BENNETT **IMAGES:** WILL BREMRIDGE

Most of the world's leading contemporary luthiers favour a restrained approached when it comes to inlay; they're understandably more focused on tone (the most notable exception being Grit Laskin, who's an acknowledged master of both). Occasionally, though, a brilliant newcomer emerges who'd be happy to rip up the rulebook – if he'd ever seen one in the first place.

When Van Morrison sang, "No guru, no method, no teacher", he could've been setting the stage for Joel Michaud, except for the fact that the young Canadian has method aplenty. Yet, unlike so many of the emerging names in modern lutherie, former apprentices to the greats who've branched out on their own, out in the wilds of north-west Canada, he's had to devise and perfect that method alone and without the aid of a safety-net.

It doesn't take long to see why this OM-R (the R is for Revisited), like all Michaud's instruments, is a complete one-off. So let's get the jewellery thing out of the way, first. There's no justifiable argument – unless it compromises tone – that says 'inlay good, in-set bad'. With that in mind, Michaud sees nothing heretical in collaborating with other like-minded artists; in this case, the Vancouver metalsmith, Frances Strathern. Her precious stone and metal designs have the randomly asymmetrical, organic quality the luthier was looking for to complement and contrast the clean lines of what is otherwise a formally respectful take on the familiar Martin OM tradition.

Neither is it that radical a departure – luthiers have been blinging-up their instruments for centuries – with the main difference being that, via the jeweller's inset technique, the panels have an irresistibly tactile as well as visual quality. None of the beaten silver panels – in the rosette, back-strip, end-graft, and most distinctively, 'floating' in the headstock – have been lacquered over. Each one is a thing of beauty, no two are alike and all are strongly reminiscent of the kind of decorative panel-work that adorns the borders of Eastern European medieval iconography. And for the accessory-conscious out there, we're looking at bronze, silver, rhodolite (or rose-coloured) garnet and, just for dessert, a 'chocolate natural diamond'.

"As you'd expect, it's big in the mid-range; balanced and lively with wonderful sustain right across the elegantly coach-lined fretboard"

Yes, Michaud's pushing the boundaries here, but we're hardly even close to 30s banjo or Laskin fretboard territory so why not? In the wider art world, artists collaborate across a variety of disciplines, it raises their game, takes them out of their comfort zone and with luck, and it'll be as much fun for the buyer as it was for the maker.

None of that produces the sound, of course. Or compromises it, for that matter. The body consists of a German spruce top, bleached-out white, with a hint of vanilla colouring, and beautifully figured, book-matched Madagascan rosewood back and sides. It's slightly wider across the lower bout to add that extra touch of sweetness to the voice and features double sides (the inner being mahogany). More and more master luthiers are beginning to embrace this technique – Somogyi, Gaffney and Kostal all use double sides – which involves coupling two lightly built, matching panels with the twin aim of adding stability and separating the top and back vibrating plates so they can work, individually and together, as efficiently as possible. There's no loss of energy from the side sections and the subsequent easier build, plus less stress in the overall structure throughout, is seen as a win-win.

Other features include a bolt-on mahogany neck with a pronounced yet unobtrusive, slightly squared-off volute, and – inside again – a floating back-brace, as seen primarily in the work of Jeff Traugott. This

"It's the respect for OM tradition in the design concept that allows the flights of fancy in the detail"

MICHAUD MADE OM-R

NEED TO KNOW

Manufacturer: Michaud Made
Model: OM-R
RRP: £8,950
Body Size: OM
Made In: British Columbia, Canada
Top: German spruce
Back and Sides: Madagascar rosewood with mahogany inner sides
Bridge: Madagascar rosewood
Neck: Mahogany
Fingerboard: Ebony
Frets: 20 Evo frets
Tuners: Rogers
Nut Width: 1 ¾"
Scale Length: 25"
Onboard Electrics: None
Strings Fitted: Elixir Phosphor Bronze Light 12-53
Gig Bag/Case Included: Includes Ameritage Custom case

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Fabulous looks, clean bright and lively tone
Cons: Genuinely can't think of anything
Overall: This stunning guitar is the combination of overall respectful restraint with touches of ultra-flash, and it works perfectly. A one-off, certainly, but far more than just a collector's piece

ACOUSTIC RATING

Sound Quality: ★★★★★
Build Quality: ★★★★★
Value for Money: ★★★★★
5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless
4 Stars: Excellent, hard to beat
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor

CONTACT DETAILS

www.michaudmade.com
www.thenorthamericanguitar.com

adds extra strength to the back and prevents neck issues, "down the line", brought on by the back flattening out. Basically, with tone in mind (and to avoid the endless techno-justification that sends most players dizzy), it delivers increased projection and power and, as Michaud succinctly puts it, makes the back "more active than reflective".

There's a faintly Matsuda-style, Mad Rose belly bridge; the theory being that a rosewood bridge on a rosewood guitar frees up more highs and mids than the traditional ebony might, a shallow Florentine cutaway, headstock back and face-plates in Mad Rose and ebony respectively, then high-end, Nova Scotia-made, Rodgers tuners that have ebony buttons.

Elsewhere, the mod-cons include ebony bindings, bone nut and saddle, evo-gold frets,

and a 25" scale-length that, coupled with the curvy lower bout, serves the impeccably even tone. It's the respect, reverence even, for long-established OM tradition in the overall design concept that allows the flights of fancy in the detail to enhance, rather than detract from, the overall aesthetic. Essentially, it works because it's all so tastefully done.

What does it sound like? Well, like an exceptionally fine OM, for a start. As you'd expect, it's big in the mid-range; balanced and lively with wonderful sustain right across the elegantly coach-lined fretboard. It's a perfect vehicle for stately DADGAD fingerstyle as much as snapping, up-tempo rhythmic pieces and – always essential – it responds equally well to a pick. Michaud's aim, tone-wise, is for all the metaphorical

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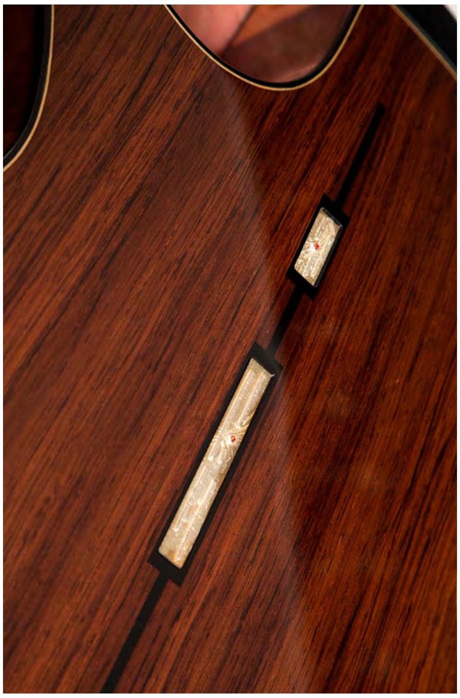
"There's a kind of crystalline shimmer to the OM-R that invites you to articulate more cleanly"



EQ dials to be set at five; no "section" of the sound – bass, middle or treble – should be overpowering any of the others. He looks for evenness across the fingerboard and, above all, a strong, immediate punch with a cathedral's-worth of headroom behind it to squash any hint of distortion when pushed hard. And he's pretty much delivered all that here.

The OM-R bears significant similarities in tone to the work of Michaud's Swedish friend and colleague, Ted Åstrand. Maybe it's something about those vast expanses of snow-covered forest that inspires a pine-fresh cleanness in their sound. Plus, Michaud's a keen outdoorsman and that sensibility inevitably translates itself into his work. While the pristine note separation ensures there's no mud or overtone soup going on, this isn't a sterile sound, either. There's a rich colour to it, a kind of crystalline shimmer that invites you to articulate more cleanly in order to conjure the best from a sound so neat and precise. Speaking of which, a quick YouTube search will uncover *Acoustic*'s own Clive Carroll making this very instrument sing via his lovely, Django-esque solo arrangement of 'Embraceable You'. You'll find there's no huge booming bass – it's not called for. The sparkling, sweet-tempered perkiness on show perfectly captures the evenly-balanced essence of what Michaud sets out to achieve. It's small-but-perfectly-formed – a bejewelled Kylie (or even Dudley Moore) of acoustics.

Twelve years ago, Joel Michaud started out in his parents' garage with just a saw and a screwdriver. Unsurprisingly, he made a lot of mistakes. The internet wasn't quite the all-powerful learning resource (among other things) it is today. He had no major influences because he had no idea what was out there. Hence, trial and error has taken him a long way. While Michaud still does a lot of things differently because his style evolved in isolation, he now sees the work of fellow Canadian masters like Michael Greenfield and Linda Manzer as a challenge to up his game rather than purely as inspiration. Maybe that's why he has a four year waiting-list. The esteemed US publication, *Fretboard Journal*, has already described his work as 'sublime'. With this OM-R being the first evidence of it in the UK, if he really is still learning all the time, Michaud's set himself a hell of task trying to improve on it. ■

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FRESHMAN UKEBONYT, UKKOACE & UKMAPLECE

So you've got a couple of decent guitars in your collection, but you want to venture into the world of ukuleles. Where do you start? Sam Wise takes a look at three wallet-friendly ukuleles

WORDS: SAM WISE **IMAGES:** RICHARD ECCLESTONE

These days, it seems everyone has a line of ukuleles, and Freshman is no different. There's a strand of opinion in the ukulele world that says you shouldn't purchase an ukulele from a guitar manufacturer, but in reality Gibson are one of the most famous ukulele makers, Taylor make the best ukulele I've ever played and at the price point these Freshmans inhabit, we can testify that there are lots of great ukes from guitar companies.

These ukuleles are all of laminate construction with a variety of veneers. There are two concerts, both with pickups, and apparently identical apart from veneer and decoration. On test is also an acoustic-only tenor. We'll look first at the concerts.

The simplest looking of the three, and the cheaper of the concerts, is the UKKOACE, veneered in relatively unfigured koa, satin finished with an engraved rather than inlaid rosette. The back and sides are bound in black and cream plastic, and the back, in common with its sisters, is delicately arched, which feels very pleasing. The bridge is a standard rectangular tie-through rosewood item with a tiny slice of mahogany veneer where the strings tie, and features a plastic uncompensated saddle, matched by a plastic nut at the other end of the course. The mahogany neck has an 18-fret rosewood fingerboard, bound again in cream plastic, and the unveneered headstock, with its engraved Freshman logo, has a set of unbranded closed back tuners.

There's a simple head unit built into the lower part of the side, with volume, bass and treble sliders and a battery door – the jack socket sits on the curve of the bottom rather than at the endpin. It's a handsome enough uke, much nicer than the budget items most players start out with, but we couldn't help feeling that if your

"The laminate construction will put off those inclined to be snobby, but it shouldn't"

koa is only a veneer, it would be nice if it were dramatically figured.

Next up is the rather more dramatic and blingy UKMAPLECE, at £150 the most expensive of the three. This features a lot more adornment than the koa veneered model; the top, back and sides being veneered in gloss-finished spalted maple. The soundhole rosette is abalone, and the top is bound with traditional rope style binding with abalone purfling, while the arched back has to make do with only the binding. The bridge, neck and fingerboard are identical with the koa model, except that the fingerboard is also bound with rope-style binding, and the headstock is veneered in spalted maple and has an inlaid, rather than engraved logo. The same pickup and electronics are fitted. Close up, this ukulele looks incredibly luxurious, though some may feel that, from a distance, so much adornment on such a small instrument makes it look over-busy. However, we rather liked it.

The last of the trio, the UKEBONYT is the only instrument on test here not to be equipped with a pickup, so although it's the only tenor, it's the cheapest of the three at £100. The top, back and sides are veneered with satin finished ebony – giving it an unusual appearance – and are bound with the same rope binding as the maple concert, but with wooden purfling forming an almost herringbone pattern with the binding strip. The rosette is once again abalone, while the back, again beautifully arched, gets more of the ropework. The bridge, saddle and neck are, longer scale apart, identical to those on the other ukes; here the fingerboard is unbound – a shame, since it would have finished off the look nicely. The headstock is ebony-faced and has the engraved, rather than inlaid, logo.

All three are built to a high standard, and while lacking the attention to detail of a high-end luthier-built instrument, there is no longer any sport in picking apart Asian built instruments: everyone seems to be making them right. Between the prices of £100 and £150, though, there are so many competently built ukes that these will need to sound great to stand out.

We started with the koa concert again, and found it pretty enough in tone, but a little on the quiet side; the tone is close to a reference all-laminate concert we had hanging around. Depending how you want to use the uke, this might be no bad thing. A plugged-in performer who wants a quieter uke for when the kids are asleep may well appreciate this. Compared to more expensive ukes we had on hand, the koa concert is a little muted, rather than pure and clear toned as solid koa would be.

Plugged in, it's a different story; the pickup is not the most nuanced you will hear, but does a great job of amplifying the little box without feedback, and the EQ lets you dial in whatever tone you want from what is a bit of an anonymous sound with everything set flat. Overall, competent enough, without knocking your socks off.

We were expecting the spalted maple model to be indistinguishable – after all, the veneer and finish appear to be the only differences – and yet, the tone is significantly different. The maple uke is a little brighter, sweeter, and louder; comparing the two on the same song, we preferred the tone of the maple uke. It's still relatively quiet, though concert ukes often seem that way, perhaps caught between the little soprano's punch and the fuller voice of a tenor's larger soundboard and higher string tension, they risk providing the downsides of both, rather than the advantages. Plugged in, the maple and koa concerts were indeed indistinguishable, and very competent.

Finally, we picked up the ebony tenor, and found it to be a revelation. Brighter, more open, and freer breathing than either of the concerts, it truly sang for us. We don't know if it was the larger soundboard and chamber, the greater resonance resulting from not having the battery box and head unit on board, or something about the laminate, but the tenor is a league above the concerts tonally. We had on hand an all-solid koa tenor uke that sells for over £400, and the Freshman was honestly comparable. We can't help wonder if the tenor would sound as good with a pickup; the only other tenor in the Freshman range is a cedar veneered electric model with a cutaway, and if it sounds as good acoustically, it will be a huge winner.

The concert ukes are decent enough; the spalted maple in particular has a pretty sweet tone, and looks fabulous if you like bling. These are ukes worthy of your consideration if they match what you need. The tenor, however, is a level above both; the laminate construction will put off the snobby, but shouldn't – you have to spend serious money to get a significantly better acoustic tenor than this. Comparing against what we have seen on the market, this might be the best £100 acoustic tenor you can find; it's great looking, unusual, with the arched back really setting it apart, and it sounds fantastic. You really must try one before you buy anything else. ■

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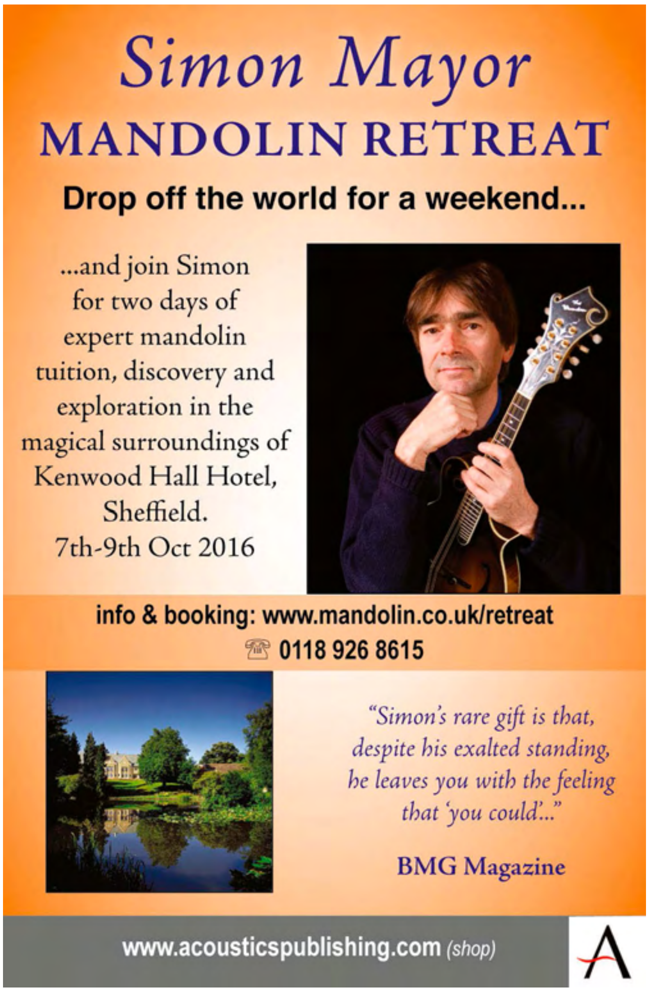
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FRESHMAN UKKOACE

Manufacturer: Freshman Guitars
Model: UKKOACE
Retail Price: £129.95
Body Size: Concert
Made In: China
Top: Koa
Back & Sides: Koa
Neck: Mahogany
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Frets: 18
Tuners: No
Nut Width: 3.5 cm
Scale Length: 38.5 cm
Gig Bag Included: Yes

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Sounds good plugged in, decent looker at a good price
Cons: Acoustically and visually perhaps a little bland
Overall: A competent performer which won't let you down

ACOUSTIC RATING

Sound Quality: ★★★★☆
Build Quality: ★★★½☆
Value for Money: ★★★★☆
5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless
4 Stars: Excellent, hard to beat
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor

CONTACT DETAILS

www.freshmanguitars.net

FRESHMAN UKEBONYT

Manufacturer: Freshman Guitars
Model: UKEBONYT
Retail Price: £99.95
Body Size: Tenor
Made In: China
Top: Ebony
Back & Sides: Ebony
Neck: Mahogany
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Frets: 18
Tuners: No
Nut Width: 3.5 cm
Scale Length: 43.2 cm
Gig Bag Included: Yes

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Really unusual looks and fabulous tone
Cons: We wish it had a bound fingerboard and a pickup option
Overall: An absolute killer at the price

ACOUSTIC RATING

Sound Quality: ★★★★☆
Build Quality: ★★★★½
Value for Money: ★★★★★
5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless
4 Stars: Excellent, hard to beat
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor

CONTACT DETAILS

www.freshmanguitars.net

FRESHMAN UKMAPLECE

Manufacturer: Freshman Guitars
Model: UKMAPLECE
Retail Price: £149.95
Body Size: Concert
Made In: China
Top: Spalted maple
Back & Sides: Spalted maple
Neck: Mahogany
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Frets: 18
Tuners: No
Nut Width: 3.5 cm
Scale Length: 38.3 cm
Gig Bag Included: Yes

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Bling and fancy looks, sweet tone, good pickup
Cons: A bit on the quiet side, looks won't be for everyone
Overall: Good performer's ukulele if you like the look

ACOUSTIC RATING

Sound Quality: ★★★★☆
Build Quality: ★★★★☆
Value for Money: ★★★★½
5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless
4 Stars: Excellent, hard to beat
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor

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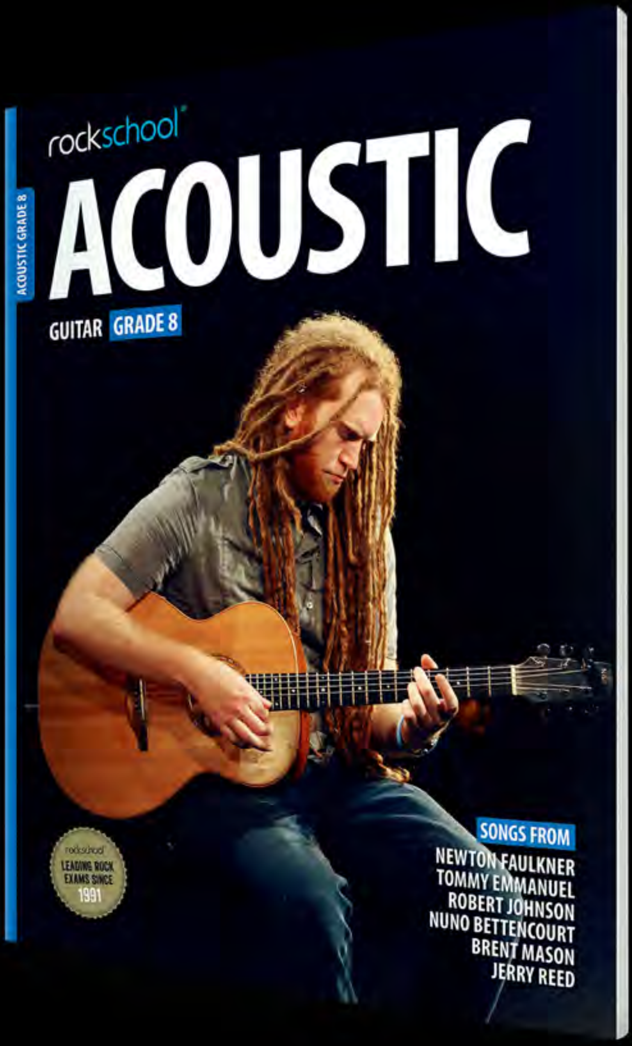

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THE LOGARHYTHM 4

Nearly a decade ago, Logjam first launched the first Logarhythm. As the trend for percussive acoustic playing continues, Logjam releases the Logarhythm 4. Steve Harvey gets his foot tapping

WORDS: STEVE HARVEY

The concept is simple. When plugged into an acoustic amp or PA, tapping or stomping on the Logarhythm gives a bass drum-like 'thud' that serves as a rhythmic accompaniment to your playing, marking beats in the bar. Based on the assumption that we are all capable of tapping our feet and can keep fairly decent time, the Logarhythm 4 can be used by just about anyone.

So what's new about version four compared to earlier versions? The dimensions of this version are pretty much the same, although the box is lighter than before due to the removal of some extraneous internal material. The main differences, however, lay inside the unit. The acoustic chamber within has been repositioned so that it's near the player's foot and angled up towards the point of impact for an improved tone and dynamic response.

The Logarhythm 4 is wider than any of the other stomp boxes in the Logjam range, meaning that it's sufficiently wide for use with both feet, rather than just one. The reason for doing this lies in the fact that the response from the box varies depending on where the foot makes contact. Far left provides a softer, less bassy thud, while far right gives a deeper, bassier and more pronounced response.

As with all stomp boxes in the Logjam range, the Logarhythm is hand-made from certified sapele, a wood tonally similar to mahogany and chosen for its density and durability, hence the three-year guarantee. No batteries are required as the Logarhythm 4 uses a passive transducer, and the unit is small and light enough to be carried around in a standard gig bag. The base of the unit is covered in a high-friction, fluted, rubber matting which means, once in place, it doesn't move – even if your foot tapping is fairly vigorous. The simplicity of the box means it is literally plug-in-and-play. All UK orders benefit from free next-day delivery, too.

In use, we had a lot of fun with the Logarhythm 4. The box is hyper-sensitive, meaning that it responds incredibly well to variations in where contact with the box is made, and how hard or soft the box is struck or tapped. We even noticed tonal differences depending on what type of shoe or trainer is worn, and whether you used the tip of your toes or the ball of your foot.

For those who are sufficiently dexterous, more complicated rhythmic patterns can be achieved by using both left and right feet; benefiting from the tonal variations either side of the box produce. If you're so inclined, you could in reality use different shoes on each feet and augment the tonal output. Because the 'thud' sounds so much like a standard bass drum, it can be used when playing both songs or even instrumentals alike.

As you might expect, we found it easiest to use the Logarhythm 4 when seated but, with practice, there's no reason why it can't be used when standing too.

If you're looking to add something to your playing, or open mic nights, we'd suggest you couldn't go far wrong with the Logarhythm 4. And while you're at it, it's worth checking out the other stomp boxes Logjam offer too – they even do a 'snare' version! ■

LOGARHYTHM 4

NEED TO KNOW

RRP: £74.99
Dimensions: 195 x 100 x 45mm
Weight: 560 grams
Freq. range: 60hz-12khz
Sensitivity: -76db+/- 3db
Impedance: 600 ohms +/- 30 per cent

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Ease of use, plug in and play simplicity, rugged construction, cheaper than drummers
Cons: Possible frustration ahead due to the player's poor time-keeping!
Overall: A fantastic little unit that every acoustic player should try at least once

ACOUSTIC RATING

Sound Quality: ✪✪✪✪✪
Build Quality: ✪✪✪✪✪
Value for Money: ✪✪✪✪✪
5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless
4 Stars: Excellent, hard to beat
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor

CONTACT DETAILS

www.logjam.net

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TIMBER TONES

We're all familiar with the tonal variances differing tonewoods can have on an acoustic guitar. But does the same go for picks?

WORDS: SAM WISE **IMAGES**: RICHARD ECCLESTONE

It would be reasonable to colour me a sceptic. As a guitar journalist, I am paid to describe the effects of different woods on acoustic guitar tone, which I can do with reasonable confidence. When I hear, however, people describing the difference in tone made by bridge pins as though it were as stark as that of the top wood, I start to wonder. I have even debated with a Fender custom shop employee who had done an experiment that apparently proved that there was a measurable difference in tone between blocks of wood painted with nitrocellulose or thicker polymer coatings. Measurable I could believe, distinguishable with the ear I could not.

Timber Tones plectrums have, therefore, been a bit of a question mark for me. I can see why the stiffness of a plectrum and the hardness of the material would affect tone, but can exotic hardwoods really impart any of their qualities when you hit a string with them? My instinct was definitely not, and yet I had been commissioned to write a review, so it was with as much relief as surprise that I found these beautiful looking picks did indeed make a significant impact on tone.

These plectrums, which are truly beautiful to look at, bear a little description. Timber Tones can provide you with plectrums in a variety of shapes, and materials including leather, bone, stone, crystal and even obsidian, but here we've stuck to exotic woods, and one shape, which mirrors most guitar picks. As they're made of wood, these plectrums are much thicker at the grip than any plastic pick and the fact that they chamfer down near the tip gives you an interesting angled picking surface to play with. The other thing that jumps out is that these picks have no flex in them whatsoever. I normally play with the large Fender 355 triangle picks, using the heaviest gauge, and it was noticeable to me that the Timber Tones flexed less even than those, so users of light gauge picks will likely notice a big difference in feel.

My vocabulary for talking about tonewoods in guitars has been built over nearly 30 years of playing, and you'll have to forgive me if I can't give the same insight into plectrums. What I did was to discard the card which tells you what's what, and simply back to back them: same guitar, licks and position in the same room. I played a little bluegrass run and flatpicking chords, some simple arpeggiated chords, and some gentler strumming. I then organised them into three piles: least bright, moderately bright and most bright.

MELLOWEST
Malay Ebony, Pale Moon Ebony, Thai Rosewood, Ironwood, Cobra's Saffron, Almondwood

MODERATE BRIGHTNESS
Macassar Ebony, African Ebony, Indian Chestnut, Purple Heart, Thai Sindora

BRIGHTEST
Lignum Vitae, Bloodwood, Burma Rosewood, Mimosa, Rose Apple, Sugar Maple, Burma Paduak

Reading the descriptions on the Timber Tones site, it appears that this reflects their views to about a 70 per cent accuracy, though there are a couple which I had in the brightest pile that they seem to consider to be among the warmest. This might simply be that when comparing a little piece of wood against a photo, which contains a number of similarly coloured pieces of wood, it's possible I simply misidentified some. Nevertheless, the clear conclusion is that you will get significantly different tones from these plectrums.

The challenge, however, resides in how you figure out which you want. These are not cheap, retailing from £3 plus shipping, compared to £5 for 12 of my favoured Fenders, so to have the 18 they sent me as a sample pack means shelling out £54 before you even identify which one you like.

I can imagine that people buying these might be accused of being 'cork sniffers', more focused on accumulating impressive gear than playing guitar. But the reality is, Timber Tones plectrums have a genuine musical effect, and it's easy to imagine people writing and playing differently dependent on which they choose, and that's good enough for me. ■

www.timber-tones.com

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A FUNNY NOTE

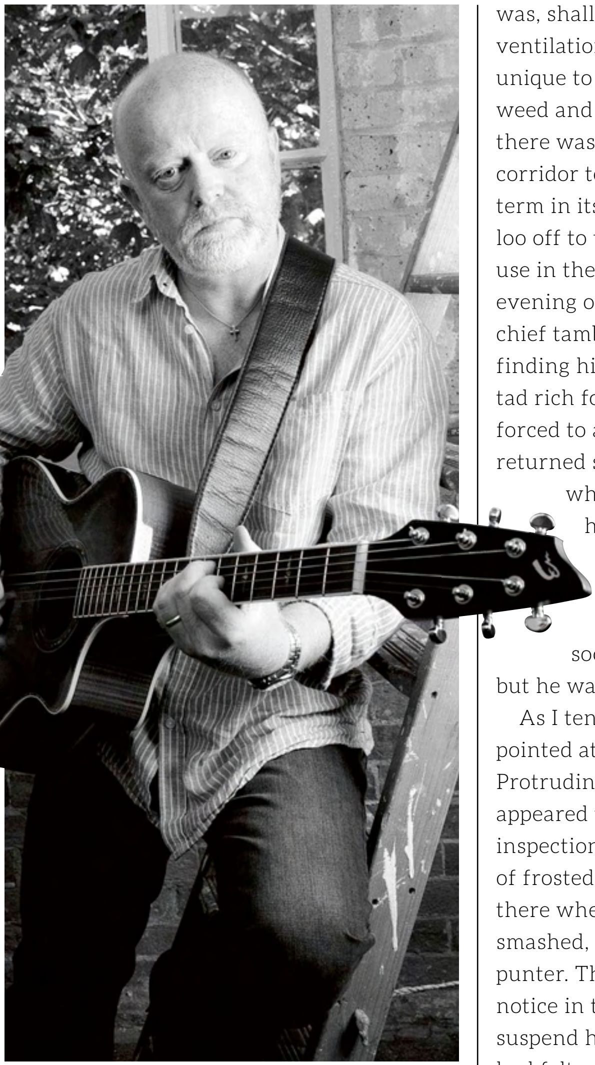
Tours of Duty

Andy Pritchard recalls tales of melting keyboards, icebergs and missing drumsticks….

Whenever a bunch of long in the tooth musos get together you can be sure that, before the evening's over, the conversation will invariably turn to gig stories, some hilarious, some darn-right frightening. Exaggeration à la Monty Python's shoebox sketch becomes the order of the day as the protagonists try to outdo each other for the 'worst gig ever' accolade. Within this subject there are, of course, subdivisions, crowd-related, promoter-related, premises-related, band colleague-related. Here are a couple of mine…

Once in the 90s, we were signed up by our management company to play this open-air festival-in-a-day type gig in a field behind a pub in Cobham, Surrey. Told that this was going to, and I quote, "launch us to the next level", it was obvious that no expense had been spared. The PA had come direct from a Simple Minds gig at Wembley Arena and as we turned up to sound check we saw a coach full of security guys waiting to deploy. There were 30 odd Portaloos set up at the side, and a huge stage and lighting rig…. The only problem was that, when we went on, there were probably 20 people sitting about 50 yards away lost in this massive field. Everyone could have had his or her own private toilet. Imagine, the first concert ever to offer an en-suite along with a personal security guard to escort you! The huge lighting rig was set up so close to the actual stage area that it melted the end of the keyboard players JX8P – he was definitely smokin' that day.

At the end of our set, Porky, our drummer, threw his sticks into the "audience" as a joke and as we cleared off the stage he walked round the front to pick them up only to find that one of the 20 had beetled forward and nicked them!



In Kentish Town in North London is the lovely venue now known as The Forum, or back in the day The Town and Country Club. All the greats had played there over the years. Fifty yards up the road is the not so lovely Bull & Gate Pub whose back room used to entertain bands seven nights a week. The only 'grate' ever to grace their premises could be found resting in the fireplace in the snug. Painted completely black, the room was, shall we say, unspoilt by conventional ventilation, possessing that odour singularly unique to backroom venues: stale beer, weed and damp. To the side of the stage there was a door, which led down a short corridor to the 'dressing room' (I use the term in its loosest sense) with a revolting loo off to the side which one would only use in the direst of circumstances. On one evening our erstwhile backing singer and chief tambourine operative, Girlie Morrison, finding his diet of McDonald's and cider a tad rich for his delicate constitution, was forced to avail himself of the facilities. He returned soon afterwards, ashen faced, and when I enquired as to his well being he said, "Come here" and led me off in the direction of the loo. Not wishing to go there under any circumstances, but especially so soon after Girlie's visit, I protested, but he was adamant.

As I tentatively peered around the door he pointed at the bowl and simply said, "Look…" Protruding from the top was what at first appeared to be an iceberg, but on closer inspection revealed itself to be a large piece of frosted glass, which had come to rest there when the window behind had been smashed, presumably by another satisfied punter. This he had unfortunately failed to notice in the gloom until, while trying to suspend himself over the loo, poor Girlie had felt pain in his derriere. It was, I believe, the realisation of what he would have done to himself had he continued to lower into the accepted position that had resulted in his ashen appearance.

There are many more of these that I could recount, indeed one at the scarier end of the spectrum I still have nightmares about 30 years later. Still like they say I guess anything that doesn't kill you makes you stronger… ■

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ACOUSTIC CAFÉ

Artists for this year's Acoustic Café have been announced, showcasing the best in new, young and emerging talent. Find out who'll be playing this year…

STEWART GARRY

Stewart brings his own personal spin to the technical proficiency of Eric Roche or Andy McKee, breaking the fingerstyle genre into new depths. He's influenced equally by his tenures in jazz group Continental Breakfast and in post-hardcore noiseniks Juinera.

www.facebook.com/stewgarry

MATT BUCHANAN

Fingerstyle guitarist Matt Buchanan draws on his background in classical guitar to create dynamic arrangements and compositions and frequently collaborates with Newton Faulkner. He also performed at the inaugural Eric Roche Acoustic Sessions in Tralee, 2015.

www.acoustic.matthewbuchanan.co.uk

ISSY FERRIS

London-based Issy Ferris' songwriting and performances are inspired by all kinds of music and poetry, her heroes being Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell and Ray LaMontagne. Ferris' music is pretty folky with a bluesy edge, rather soft and mellow.

www.facebook.com/issyferrismusic

LUCA FIORE

Luca Fiore is a professional acoustic, classical and electric guitarist and singer/songwriter from Italy. Luca's style is a rare mix of various music genres such as rock, fusion, pop, metal, bossa nova and classical music, with a subtle progressive approach.

www.lucafioremusic.com

JOSH RIDER

Josh Rider is an instrumental guitarist from Cirencester. After discovering the likes of Andy McKee, Don Ross and Erik Mongrain on YouTube, Josh found a style of guitar that he had never heard before, but was instantly hooked. This led him to put down his electric guitar and experiment with the acoustic sound.

www.facebook.com/josh-rider

EMILY MAE WINTERS

Emily Mae Winters' haunting folk songs are quickly permeating the folk and songwriting scene. Influenced by the sounds of traditional and contemporary folk, Celtic, country and Americana music, she learned to play the guitar and piano and began playing local music festivals.

www.emilymaewinters.com

PERFORMANCE SCHEDULE

SATURDAY	SUNDAY
11.00 – Kev Minney	**11.00** – Emily Mae Winters
12.00 – Luca Fiore	**12.00** – John Clapper
13.00 – Connor Thomas	**13.00** – Tommy Loose
14.00 – Issy Ferris	**14.00** – Stewart Garry
15.00 – Jon Hart	**15.00** – Matt Buchanan
16.00 – Josh Rider	**16.00** – David Youngs

The line-up for this year's Acoustic Café at the London Acoustic Show has been announced and features a wide range of artists from virtuosos to singer-songwriters. As part of the show staged at London Olympia on 10-11 September, the Acoustic Café showcases young, new and emerging talent. The Acoustic Café stage will be located in its usual place, adjacent to the refreshments area on level three. All performances are free of charge and start on the hour, every hour.

JOHN CLAPPER

John Clapper has developed a reputation for his imaginative and entertaining sets. Now living, gigging and busking in London, his use of the loop pedal has to be seen and heard to be believed!

www.johnclapper.co.uk

JON HART

Jon Hart is one of the UK's most versatile singer songwriters, merging virtuoso fingerstyle guitar with vocal melodies and harmonies that draw you into his world.

www.jonhartmusic.com

TOMMY LOOSE

Tommy has been an active solo performer for over 20 years, with gigs all over the UK and Europe. He's currently touring his newest release, *Carrying The Unfixable*, which showcases the harp guitar.

www.tommyloose.co.uk

KEV MINNEY

Kev Minney is a Brighton based acoustic guitar player, singer and songwriter. Taking inspiration from folk greats Simon and Garfunkel, Neil Young and Nick Drake, Kev blends his creative guitar playing with traditional pop melodies.

www.facebook.com/kevminney

CONNOR THOMAS

Connor Thomas is a 16-year-old acoustic fingerstyle guitarist earning a name for himself in the North East of England. At such a young age, he is able to wow his audience and fill the room with presence. We're excited to see this rising star, who has been described as a young 'Tommy Emmanuel protégé'.

www.connorthomasmusic.com

DAVID YOUNGS

Acoustic recently wrote of Youngs: "Carefully controlled, Youngs' work has a delightful deftness – reminiscent of Eric Roche and Michael Hedges – and with bags of brooding power lurking beneath". Come and see what got us so excited about Youngs' playing.

www.davidyoungs.net

ALOHA **ESPAÑA**

We pick the brains of the men behind the new Aloha España album: ukulele legend Daniel Ho, flamenco superstar Pepe Romero Sr and master luthier Pepe Romero Jr

WORDS: OLLIE MCGHIE

The ukulele is often seen as the fun, colourful counterpoint at an open mic night. Its higher pitch, small volume and percussive quality make it the perfect voice and instrument combination. A recent collaboration between a master luthier and two world-renowned musicians has sought to expand this perception, bringing the ukulele to the classical stage, hoping to show it as a serious instrument capable of serious repertoire.

The recently released *Aloha España* album features world-renowned flamenco and classical maestro Pepe Romero Sr, and Grammy award-winning Hawaiian Daniel Ho on the ukulele. They play some of the most famous repertoire in the world of classical guitar as solos and newly arranged duets, from Albéniz's 'Leyanda' to Tárrega's 'Recuerdos de la Alhambra' – all on the carefully-crafted instruments of master luthier Pepe Romero Jr.

When Pepe Jr first began making ukuleles it caused some consternation amongst his family as he had an order book of guitars to build stretching three years ahead. The reason for his new venture soon became obvious. "The late John King (d.2009) was a good friend of the family and he was the first to request a ukulele from me. At the time I wasn't ready for it but I loved the sound of the ukulele and what John played really impressed me."

Pepe Romero Sr was similarly inspired by John King. "I taught him for many years and he became a fantastic ukulele player. It was John King who showed me what the ukulele could do, especially when he played Bach – it took on a personality somewhere between the harpsichord and the guitar." But this still wasn't enough to push Pepe Jr into building them.

"Five years ago I went to Hawaii with my wife and daughter and fell in love with the islands, the music... and the ukulele. If I hadn't fallen in love with the culture it may never have happened. I

had to build them from a place inside my heart."

On returning home Pepe Jr started building ukuleles in the style of small classical guitars. "I build guitars in my grandfather's old house where my father and uncles live," he says. "When I turn my energies to the ukulele I bring to it all the knowledge from the classical guitar, all the playing I hear."

Initially Pepe Jr started with a run of eight instruments and within a week of building, all the ukuleles were spoken for. "That was an amazing sign. I did it again and the same thing happened. It turned into a great parallel business to my guitar making and I wound up starting the production company: Romero Creations."

As Pepe Jr finished each new instrument, his family heard the sounds they were producing and were impressed by the power, tone and richness. "It was only then that they understood. My dad and uncle Celin are now very involved in the stringing up of each instrument. We spend time analysing what's going on. As a luthier I've learned so much from them. To them, it's exciting because it's an evolution they're a huge part of."

Through building these instruments, Pepe Jr met Daniel Ho. "We challenge each other to explore beyond our comfort zones," says Daniel.

"Unique instruments like the Tiny Tenor and XS Soprano were the fruits of these brainstorms. The Tiny Tenor has spot-on intonation all the way up the neck and I can play a double forte rest stroke on every fret of every string without buzzing. This sort of thing is very difficult to accomplish on the short scale of a ukulele."

The album was something Pepe Jr never thought would happen. "It's such a complicated venture," Pepe Jr says. "The biggest goal for me is to show people the potential of the ukulele and that it's not a second rate instrument – it can be taken very seriously and is capable of producing sounds of the highest quality."

For Daniel, 'Aloha España' is the culmination of a lifetime of study and practice as a composer and player. "It challenged me to the brink of my abilities and I am grateful for everything I have learned from Pepe Romero Sr and Jr in the process."

This album goes some way to bridging the gap between Hawaiian and classical music and showcasing the ukulele as an instrument with musical gravitas. In the capable hands of the Romero family and Daniel Ho, it seems hard to imagine the project not turning into a success. ■

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OSCAR CORNEY

STYLE… BLUES/FOLK/POP/COUNTRY

I'm a guitarist turned singer-songwriter from Cambridge, pursuing a new love for writing songs. The songs can come from anywhere. Most are written in a specific moment in time – they're rarely planned, and all come from either a certain emotion, riff or vocal melody. My EP *Be Someone* was released earlier this year. As it was my first release, I chose three songs that had a similar message of doing what you love, regardless of anything in your way. The title track is the one that means the most to me. It's about standing out from the crowd, and breaching your comfort zone to pursue what you love to do. 'Pretend' is about a relationship close to home that was falling apart at the time, and 'My Way Home' is about going off and doing what you want to do.

Acoustic guitar is always my first port of call in songwriting. If I find a nice chord sequence on my electric, I will always take it straight to my acoustic, as I find it's a lot easier to connect with. You can sit almost anywhere, find that creative spot and get going. At present, my number-one acoustic for shows and writing is my gorgeous vintage sunburst Gibson J-45. It has this warm, deep sound that other acoustics struggle to replicate. On live shows I run through a pedalboard consisting of a tuner, a TC Electronics BodyRez enhancer to clean up, a vintage Boss DD-3 delay and then a Strymon Bluesky to give me airy reverbs for certain songs. Then I'll go straight through the DI. I play both pick and fingerstyle, and I use capos a lot to pitch myself in different keys. I've written songs in tunings like DADGAD, but usually won't play them live to avoid breaking strings and wasting time de-tuning.

I've just finished two tracks to release soon, alongside a music video, and have a big hometown show at The Junction in Cambridge on 23 September.

www.facebook.com/oscarcorneymusic

SAMANTHA MUIR

STYLE… (CLASSICAL)

Most people are familiar with classical guitar but surprised that I also play classical ukulele and *machete de braga*, a small, four-string guitar from Madeira. Based in Sherborne, Dorset, I'm a teacher, performer and arranger, and I've recently released *The Beauty Of Uke*, an album of solo instrumental ukulele music. Ukuleles are mostly strummed, but I always play fingerstyle; I wanted to create an album of fingerstyle arrangements exploring the beautiful, harp-like quality of the instrument. My favourite piece is the 'Bach Prelude', originally written for the cello. It was quite challenging to arrange this for the ukulele, but I was happy with the result.

On the album I play a 20s-style Ike soprano-size ukulele, custom-made by Liam Kirby in Bristol. It has 15 frets – three more than usual – in order to play the Bach. The body and neck are mahogany, the fingerboard is rosewood with Waverly friction tuning pegs.

On my previous album, *Alma Apaixonada*, I played a Greg Smallman and Sons 2011 classical guitar. I love Smallman guitars – the sound is so full and resonant. It's also perfectly balanced and comfortable to play. I've not done much composing, but all of it has been on the guitar. In the last few years I've done a lot of arranging for the ukulele after I was commissioned by Schott to arrange a book of Scottish folk tunes for ukulele. I've also created my own series of e-books called *The Little Book of…* with arrangements of classical and traditional tunes.

Future plans? Guitar Echoes is a project where photographic slide shows by award-winning photographer Josie Elias are projected while I perform. We've been touring the South West and are looking at other venues. I'm performing at Poyntington, Dorset in September, teaching and performing at the Uke East Festival in Norwich from 23-25 September and playing a concert in Exmouth on 5 October.

www.samanthamuir.com

BEN DEBERRY

STYLE… (AMERICAN ROOTS)

What inspires my songwriting? Moods, feelings, interpersonal interactions, nature… I never seem to know what will inspire the next one. I'm a guitar player from Nashville and happen to be in a band, The Danberrys, with my wife Dorothy. We got our start when we both decided to begin recording our songs. It was quite a happy accident. Our songs draw from a multitude of American roots music from the past and present. There's no real rhyme or reason to the focus of the songs, with some being serious and some being more light-hearted. Our new album *Give And Receive* was recorded at Southern Ground in Nashville, where the vibe is perfect and the instrument selection is divine. I got to play an old Martin owned by Townes Van Zandt on my song 'Get Back Home'. Currently my favorite track is 'Lady Belle', written by Dorothy. It really draws me into its lush sounds and darkish mood. The meaning is probably different to every listener, but a Lady Belle is a beautiful weed that is mistakenly planted in gardens only to take them over. I write all of my songs on acoustic guitars. A lot of them seem to spring out of thin air. Other times they come from riffs or chord progressions that have been lingering about for extended periods of time. I currently play a Larrivée OM-03 with a LR Baggs iMix pickup – I love the smaller size, and it sounds fantastic plugged in. I've been playing it for about two years now, and it's my favourite performing guitar. I pick about 90 per cent of the songs and fingerpick the rest. I run through a Fishman acoustic delay pedal with tap tempo, and straight into a Fishman Performer acoustic amplifier. I send my signal to front of house via the post output, which gives me more control over my sound. Future plans? Touring in support of our new album and writing and recording for the next one.

www.thedanberrys.com

NORMA MACDONALD

STYLE… (AMERICANA)

I'm originally from Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, but now live in Halifax, the provincial capital. The summer after my first year of university, I bought a guitar and a chord book and decided I was going to learn to play. The banjo is a newer instrument to me. I'm mostly self-taught, but have had many informal lessons over the years. My fourth solo album, *Burn The Tapes*, is out now, and sonically I feel I was finally able to make an album sound almost exactly the way I wanted. There's an underlying theme of getting rid of things that are no longer useful or helpful to you. It's also a fairly nostalgic album – my dad died unexpectedly three weeks before the Canadian release. None of these songs were written with him specifically in mind, but when I listen to the album as a whole, I catch little glimpses of him in it everywhere. My favourite track is 'To Nebraska'. It's pretty dark and ominous but still has a strong undercurrent of hopefulness. My regular guitar is a Gibson J-45. I'm totally in love with it – the tone is so rich and deep. It inspires me to write more than my previous guitar, a Larrivée C-05 – I haven't been playing it much since I got the Gibson four years ago. At gigs, I just plug into whatever DI is at the gig then into the PA. My banjo is a Gold Tone CC-100R. I put a Schatten pickup in it and just play through DI to the PA. It sounds really great but it's far too heavy for me, even if I take the resonator off the back. I actually have a rotator cuff injury from playing it. I am currently just trying to get back into composing. I write on both guitar and banjo, but I have to wait until something strikes me. I'm putting some demos together, but no plans for recording a new album just yet.

www.normamacdonald.com

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NORMA MACDONALD
BURN THE TAPES
WWW.NORMAMACDONALD.COM

Maybe it's something about Nova Scotia, but there's always an airy freshness about the artists that pop up from that windswept coast, and Norma MacDonald's no exception. Whether on the gentle banjo lead strut of 'Blue Jay Way' – with its distant chorus and thumping drum that recalls the grandeur of Bon Iver – or the haunting 'Before You Say Goodnight', there's a warmth and sincerity to her voice that puts her right up there with the best. A dark, tremolo-laden guitar introduces 'Lighten Up', a loping duet with Gabe Minnikin that could be one of Daniel Lanois' finest hours with Emmy Lou, while 'To Nebraska' is a song that evokes lonely midnight highways. Entrancing songs beautifully produced. **JP**

KIT HAWES & AARON CATLOW
THE FOX
WWW.KITHAWESANDAARONCATLOW.COM

Mainstays of the band Sheelanagig, for two people, guitarist Kit Hawes and fiddler Aaron Catlow kick up one heck of a ruckus. Indeed when they launch into one of their spirited workouts like 'The Fighter' or 'John Barleycorn Must Die', the depth and ingenuity of the arrangements might easily fool the listener into imagining a full band was playing. Seamlessly ringing the changes, whether it's the Appalachian flavoured 'Country Blues' or one of their several originals, the pair demonstrate an eclectic approach that lifts them head and shoulders above the pack. **JP**

BEN BEDFORD
THE PILOT AND THE FLYING MACHINE
WWW.BENBEDFORD.COM

Taking inspiration from artists as diverse as Townes Van Zandt, Thelonious Monk and Kate Bush, it's no surprise to find that the fourth album from Illinois singer Ben Bedford distils his disparate muses into a fascinating musical gumbo. The sparse arrangements work particularly well on the melancholy 'Blood On The Missouri', a Dylan-esque epic relating the tragic events of 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, and 'The Voyage Of John And Emma', the tale of Ben's grandparents emigration to the US. The weeping strings could do with taking an occasional fag break, but Ben's a passionate wordsmith whose future must shine bright. **JP**.

BILLY BRAGG & JOE HENRY
SHINE A LIGHT
WWW.BILLYBRAGG.CO.UK

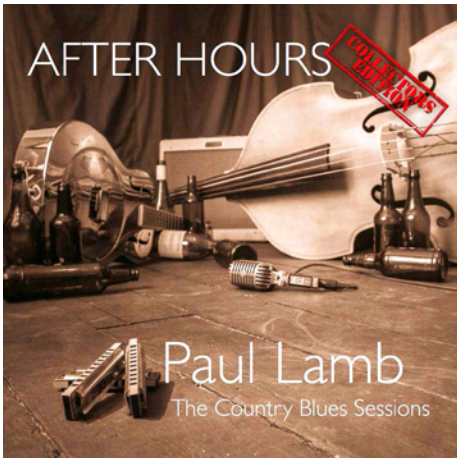
Confirming his fascination with all things dusty Americana, the bard of Barking strikes again! With Joe Henry also 'riding the blinds', the pair set off on a 65-hour railroad trek from Chicago to Los Angeles armed with not much more than a couple of acoustic guitars, a recording deck and an encyclopaedic knowledge of classic railroad songs. At stops along the way they jumped off to record anthems like Hank Williams 'Lonesome Whistle' and the Memphis Jug Band's 'K C Moan'. Billy and Joe give it their throaty all, the background noises making it easy to imagine these guys were recording for John Lomax circa 1939. Nothing new, but as musical travelogues go, it's a treat. **JP**

THREE BUCKET JONES

TAKE THESE GHOSTS

WWW.3BUCKETJONES.COM

The cacophonic anarchy of the Tredegar Brass Band tuning up introduces Gitika Partington's smoky singing on 'You & Me Thing', a track that summons the spirits of Björk, Kate Bush and maybe even Sergeant Pepper. But then these Welsh sonic wizards have never done things in half measures, and this ambitious second album once again sees them coming up with the judicious mix of acoustic folk and smart pop that's their trademark. By turns spectral, and cloaked with Gary Hughes' ethereal synths, songs like the Bowie-esque 'Gravity' and title track hit a laid back groove that hangs around first gear, but never fails to engage wonder. **JP**

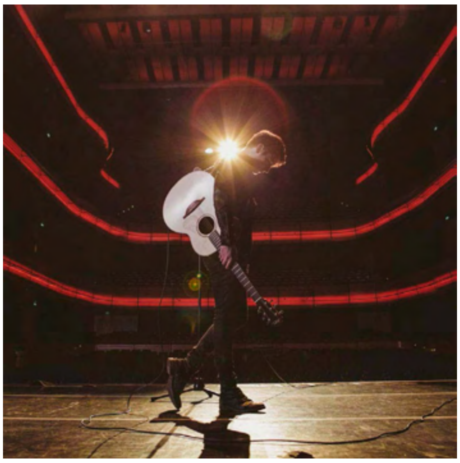


PAUL LAMB

AFTER HOURS

WWW.PAULLAMB.COM

When they finally get around to writing the annals of the British blues scene, one name that will surely be right up there with the best of them will be that of Paul Lamb. And this intimate acoustic set, recorded with his band the King Snakes in an after hours session, shows exactly why. As Paul and his boys hunker down on standards like Junior Parker's 'Mystery Train' or Sonny Boy Williamson's 'Mule To Ride', you can almost taste the moonshine and smell the catfish frying. And when Ryan Lamb backs up his old man on his acoustic guitar on Sonny Terry's 'Preachin' The Blues', it's so funky you can almost smell it. If the blues is new territory, then start right here. **JP**



RJ THOMPSON

LIVE

WWW.RJTHOMPSONMUSIC.COM

It's always a brave move to record a live album, and Newcastle singer/songwriter RJ Thompson has gone for it in style, mixing tracks from two performances, one with his tight band and one solo. RJ's obviously a man with no lack of ideas. An encounter with a Californian hobo is the inspiration for 'Cannery Row', the acoustic 'Walking After Midnight' recalls Jimmy Reed-style loping blues, while the stomping title track is a powerfully crafted piece of sunshine pop. Despite the at times disparate influences, it's an album that holds attention from start to finish… and that's no mean feat! **JP**

KRIS KRISTOFFERSON

THE COMPLETE MONUMENT & COLUMBIA ALBUM COLLECTION

WWW.KRISKRISTOFFERSON.COM

Always the lone wolf, but as this formidable compilation shows, there was always a lot more to Kris Kristofferson than a guy who liked getting wasted with Keith Moon. Simply put, he's one of America's greatest, and most profound songwriters, with a back catalogue rivalled by few of his peers. With so many gems on offer – 16 albums, including three live shows – it's difficult to know where to begin. But for starters the live set from the 1970 Big Sur takes a lot of beating. Kristofferson's genius shines like an uncut diamond on so much of this selection. Who needs 'Me And Bobby McGhee'? **JP**

HARP AND A MONKEY

WAR STORIES

WWW.HARPANDAMONKEY.COM

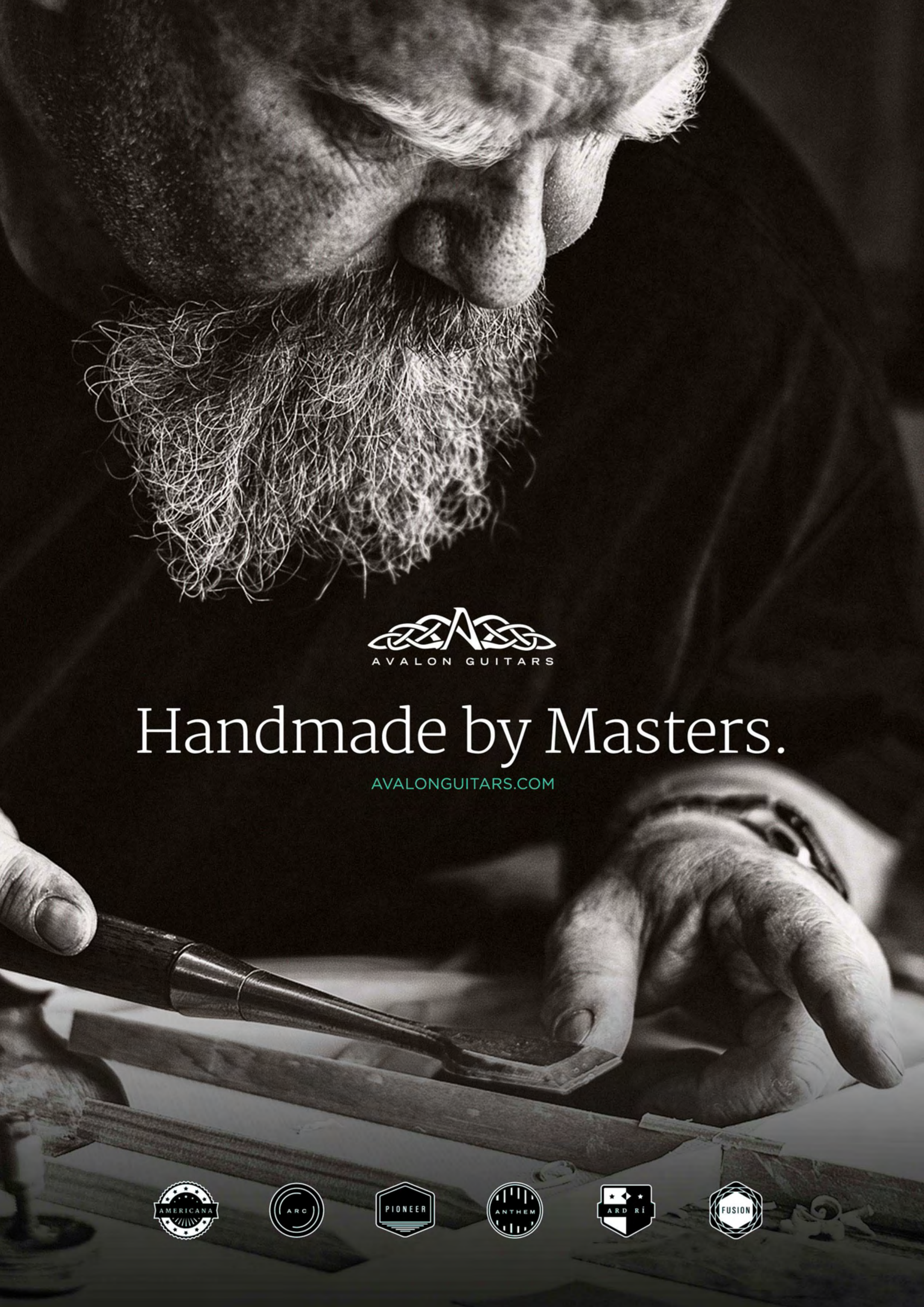
With a release timed to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the battle of the Somme, Harp And A Monkey is the brainchild of first world war expert Martin Purdy. With fellow instrumentalists Simon Jones and Andy Smith, he touches on forgotten aspects of the conflict: the Rudyard Kipling poem 'Soldier Soldier', where a bereaved lover is propositioned by his best friend; the salutary warning of 'diseases' incurred by mixing with camp followers on 'A Young Trooper Cut Down'. And there are plenty more thought-provoking songs, all played with minimal acoustic backing, allowing the troubling words to resonate. That said the result is never maudlin, just a fine heartfelt tribute. **JP**

CALIFORNIA FEETWARMERS

SILVER SEAS

WWW.CALIFORNIAFEETWARMERS.COM

Mixing ragtime, hot jazz, western swing and blues is a foolproof combination guaranteed to make crowds want to kick off their Doc Martens, take another slug and hit the floor. And this bunch of seven desperadoes from out west certainly kick up one heck of a shindig. Mining old New Orleans classics alongside freshly penned originals, Andy Bean's steel guitar moans with tantalising intimacy on 'The Breeze That Brought Me Home', and a clattering banjo leads into 'Red Headed Romp'. A sack-load of good time music just right for bad times. **JP**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O'HOOLEY & TIDOW

SHADOWS

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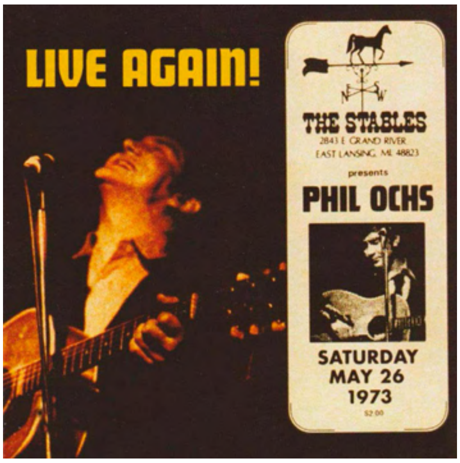
If it's becoming harder to define 'folk' music these days, then the Ms's O'Hooley and Tidow are a prime example. On the one hand their songs like 'Colne Valley Hearts' and 'Made In England', with lyrics extolling the 'smog-stained stone of home', are engrained in the 'roots' tradition, but the music is not. Centred around the Steinway grand piano, and with Michelle Stodart of the Magic Numbers playing electric guitar, the pair's glorious but forlorn harmonies make even the most heart rending subject – the wounded WW1 veteran of 'Pixie' – transcend categorisation. Thought provoking but maybe too serious for comfort. **JP**



PHIL OCHS

LIVE AGAIN

WWW.SONNYOCHS.COM

Anti-war and civil rights activist Phil Ochs was a stalwart of the fledgling New York folk scene that spawned Bob Dylan. And listening to this vibrant 1973 concert, you're left wondering why Ochs never hit the heights that surely must have been his due? There are gems aplenty. 'There But For Fortune', written 'in the back of a 1956 Ford heading for Nebraska' found fame through Joan Baez's version, and the left wing polemic of 'Here's To The State Of Richard Nixon', with Ochs' amusing but acerbic introduction, is guaranteed to make you smile. Meanwhile 'I Ain't Marching Anymore' is a thought provoking and powerful Dylanesque requiem for our times. **JP**

THE ESKIES

AFTER THE SHERRY WENT ROUND

WWW.THEESKIES.COM

A bewhiskered quintet from Dublin who look like they've just finished driving cattle over the range, the Eskies' trademark is a no holds barred rambunctious mish-mash of folk, swamp blues, and Dixieland jazz, laced with a hefty dose of knees-up gypsy mayhem.

But when they hit a kind of warp speed moment, as in the romping 'Down By The River', with their razor sharp arrangements and commendable restraint, they put most of their rampaging peers to shame. In other words this is music that you would enjoy listening to, rather than just flailing around to. **JP**

PISTOL PETE WEARN

SERVICE STATION COFFEE

WWW.PISTOLPETEWEARN.CO.UK

If you're fed up with bluesmen from Slough moaning about Highway 51, a road they're probably never going to travel, then check out Pistol Pete and 'Eight Miles From Stafford' – at least the guy's a realist. Mixing original songs with some old warhorses like Blind Willie Johnson's 'Nobody's Fault But Mine' and 'Jesus On The Mainline', an old Gospel tune that begins with a hideously distorted slide guitar, before he takes over on banjo with a thumping foot stomp, Pete's approach – like some of his subject material – is far from orthodox. And maybe that's not a bad thing; after all it didn't do Seasick Steve any harm. Not for blues bores, but a lot of fun. **JP**

SARA WATKINS

YOUNG IN ALL THE WRONG WAYS

WWW.SARAWATKINS.COM

On this solo album, Sara Watkins, the founder member of genre hopping Nickel Creek, lays down her fiddle to pick up her Gibson hollow-body. Described as a 'break up album with myself', it's no surprise that the heartbeat of her self-penned material is more than a little emotionally charged. The result, particularly when she sings the soft rock lament 'Move Me', is an album that often brings to mind the glory days of Sheryl Crow. Although never mawkish, it's an album that somehow hangs together, conjuring up a sparse moody arrangement for the sad 'Like New Year's Day', as easily as dropping back into a country honk for 'One Last Time'. No easy task but this is timeless fare. **JP**

AZIZA BRAHIM

ABBAR EL HAMADA

WWW.AZIZABRAHIM.COM

Truly great music transcends the need for understandable lyrics, and so it is with Aziza Brahim. Born and raised in the Sahrawi refugee camps of the Algerian desert, as an exiled migrant now living in Spain, her songs are full of defiance, but also much beauty. 'Buscando La Paz' merges a samba beat with wonderful, spiky and jittery west African guitar, before the pulsing desert rock of 'Calles De Dajla', a hypnotic, trance like song, finds Aziza's haunting voice floating free. Given the subject material – for instance 'Los Muros' depicts the trauma of Morocco's Saharan wall on the indigenous nomadic tribes – it's a strangely laid back album, but also totally bewitching. **JP**

GLASTONBURY FESTIVAL

We sent intrepid reporter Andy Hughes to sift through the mud and uncover the acoustic diamonds at Worthy Farm. It's a tough job, but someone's got to do it…

WORDS: ANDY HUGHES

Fortunately, for lovers of the more traditional music at Glastonbury Festival, the Acoustic Tent is at the top of a hill, so the slog up is nicely balanced by the absence of puddles and muddy ground.

The Acoustic Tent is not a massive arena, so it lends itself perfectly to the intimacy and closeness that makes acoustic music such a personal experience for performers and audience alike.

So, in no special order, a look back at the musicians who make this particular corner of Worthy Farm an enjoyable place to spend the majority of the weekend.

Everyone knows about the Shires, who needed no work whatsoever to win over an appreciative audience here. With a lively set, perfectly suited to just this size of audience, they rattle through their increasingly well-known songs to a captive and engaged audience. The Shires are fun, they have upbeat songs, they sing them with huge enthusiasm and they carry along an audience – expect more great things from them soon.

In a similar vein, Ward Thomas are effortlessly riding the wave of country popularity. Their harmonies are sheer perfection, and no doubt they'll find themselves on a bigger stage soon.

The Alarm are the originators of that acoustic stadium rock that so many bands have imitated in the following years, and here they are to remind people that as rabble-rousers with air-punching songs and emotional impact to burn, they are still the kings of their craft.

Ed Harcourt mixes in some new material with his known output, and adds to the good-time atmosphere that has always been a feature of his own gigs, and the overall feeling up here on the hill at Glastonbury. Harcourt provides catchy melodies, and adds thought-provoking lyrics to them to provide a series of songs that will never be background music at dinner parties.

Veteran Ralph McTell is probably the folk singer everyone can name thanks to his enduring and pejorative one-hit-wonder status. But Ralph is far more than that almost accidental radio standard; his career has endured because of his mix of much better songs, combined with his ease and wit with any audience anywhere. Far more important was his authentic 'standard', 'From Clare To Here', which provided the highlight of a sterling performance.

A great song will sound good no matter what you play it on. Putting this adage into a perfect working example is one-time 'social menace' and current acoustic troubadour Glen Matlock. Turning the one-time DIY punk crash-bang-wallop of 'God Save The Queen' into a Springsteen-style stadium shouter, Matlock showed that musicianship and stagecraft are a large part of his current work ethic.

Gabrielle Aplin made a 'surprise' appearance on the BBC Introducing Stage, which was packed thanks to the news breaking on social media. Aplin played with the assured confidence of the seasoned performer she has become.

An early set for Blair Dunlop proved no obstacle for his increasingly committed fan base. Despite carrying the twin burdens of being the son of a seriously famous father, and being touted by some in the media as 'the next Richard Thompson', Dunlop played his songs with understated confidence, content to know that the quality of his work is going to outshine the soon-forgotten hype around him.

Acoustic stalwarts Difford and Tilbrook enjoyed their 'elder statesmen' status to bring the peerless Squeeze to the Pyramid Stage for a jaunty acoustic guitar-led gallop through their wonderful songbook. They don't have the bombastic hype of headliners Coldplay, but they have the songcraft and lyrical majesty to leave the headliners in the dust, which they duly did.

The big news for the acoustic community – and proof if any were needed that acoustic music continues its solid growth in popularity – was the placing of Jake Bugg as the final act on the John Peel Stage. His unenviable timeslot matched that of festival headliners and all-round crowd-pullers Coldplay, who were already well into their stride by the time Bugg stepped into the lights.

His youthful appearance is well offset by the confident maturity of his delivery, and the Jake Bugg takeover as acoustic music's figurehead can carry on a while longer.

The strength of Glastonbury – as with any festival – is the ability to see the familiar and exciting along with the new and up-coming, and that philosophy works well up at the Acoustic Stage. No doubt this cornerstone of the weekend will be providing its own eclectic mix of acoustic-based music for the discerning festival-goer next year too. We'll be in our usual position – taking it all in at the front. Make sure you join us. ■

©nickwebb

THINKING **INSIDE** THE BOX

In this first of a new series designed to examine the physics and dynamics of the humble acoustic guitar, luthier Nick Benjamin discusses sound production

WORDS & IMAGES: NICK BENJAMIN

An important and enjoyable part of my work as a guitar maker involves guiding my customers through the process of deciding on specifications when they order an instrument, and this frequently leads into a general description of how guitars work and how this relates to the possible options. I'm very happy to talk about this subject; it's something that's very close to my heart. In fact, once I get going, you might find it difficult to shut me up! I also find myself giving younger makers lengthy 'lectures' these days, whether they like it or not. Fortunately, they mostly take these in good humour! I thought a more focused outlet for my tendency to ramble on at length about guitars might be to get some of it down on paper and, not having the time or desire right now to add to the ever-growing raft of books on lutherie. I duly approached *Acoustic* to suggest a series of, hopefully, slightly less rambling guitar-based articles. I hope you enjoy them!

So let's start with a question I get asked a lot: it's called the 'soundhole' because that's where the sound comes out, right?

Well, some sound does kind of 'come out' of the soundhole but a guitar is not like a hose gushing out sound, and sound doesn't really flow like water but rather pulses back and forth. What you are hearing when you listen to a guitar is much more complex than just sound from one source and is actually a delicious mix of sound from several parts of the instrument, all of which play important parts in the sound you hear, and all of which are interlinked in a complex 'dance'. Every guitar has subtly (or dramatically) different 'dance moves' and it is this that gives each design or individual guitar its own distinct personality.

The acoustic guitar is, essentially, a moving mechanism, a 'machine' if you will, that transforms the vibration of a tensioned string into vibration of the air. You may not be able to see a guitar moving (apart from the strings) but it certainly does! Superficially, a guitar may seem similar to a loudspeaker driven by a vibrating string rather than an electric signal, but a hi-fi or PA speaker is designed to accurately transfer its input to its output with little or no tonal change. The joy of the dancing wooden machine we are talking about here, on the other hand, is its role as a sound modifier that colours and shapes the simple tone of the string as it transforms the vibrations from one form into another. It is the endless possibilities for sound creation by playing with how this 'machine' functions that makes the job I'm so fortunate to do so much fun – most days – and seems to have turned into a lifetime's obsession.

Strings are great at producing a vibration that sustains at a definite pitch: a 'note'. They easily cut through the air as they vibrate but, for this very reason, they are very bad at transferring this vibration to the air to create what we usually refer to as 'sound' – strings on their own are virtually silent. What is required is something that doesn't slip easily through the air when it vibrates; something that can push and pull against the air; something with a larger vibrating surface that can fan the air back and forth at the same rate as the vibrating string that we must use to move this 'fan' if it's going to be an 'acoustic' guitar. Enter the 'soundboard'. Next month I'll talk in detail about how the strings' vibration is modified and passed to the air by the ingenious device that is the acoustic guitar! ■

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THE SLIDE GUIDE

DOBRO

What's in a name? Chris Eaton arrests any confusion in the world of Dobro

There can be some confusion around the word Dobro. Much of it derives from the fact that the word is actually a brand name – which is now owned by Gibson – but it has also become the generic description for a certain type of guitar regardless of the manufacturer. To clear this up, we're talking about a squareneck resonator (resophonic) instrument, which can only be played with the guitar on the player's lap and with a slide. It has a wooden body and a spider style bridge (unlike metal body resos with biscuit bridges).

Sometimes the word Dobro is used to describe roundneck wooden body resonators, but for this column I'm focusing on squarenecks. Clear? I hope so.

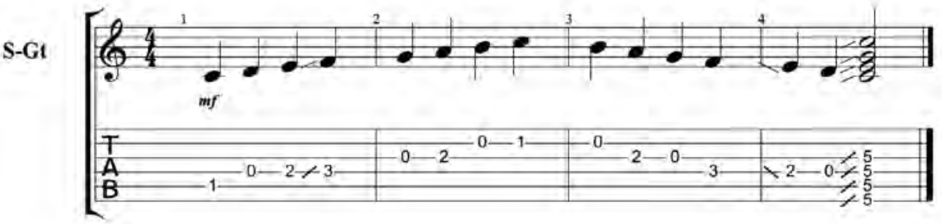
This instrument is all about tone: massive, honking slide guitar tone. The resonator cone and spider bridge produce a distinctive and unique sound. With very high string action and the use of a heavy steel slide (known as a bar) this is the ultimate slide guitar. Lap steel instruments are the best way to produce slide tone, there's no danger of clanking your slide on the frets or having to develop a light touch. However, the trade off is that you can only play slide on these guitars – no fretted notes are possible. So, in that sense it's 50 per cent a different instrument from bottleneck guitar. Your right hand works in the same way, but not your left.

In the same way that a metal body resonator will forever be linked to the image and sound of blues music, the Dobro will always be related to country and western or bluegrass. By far the most well known player is Jerry Douglas. His successful career has done so much to popularise the Dobro

EXAMPLE 1 - C MAJOR SCALE

Dobro Open G
①= D
⑤= B
⑥= G
♩ = 120

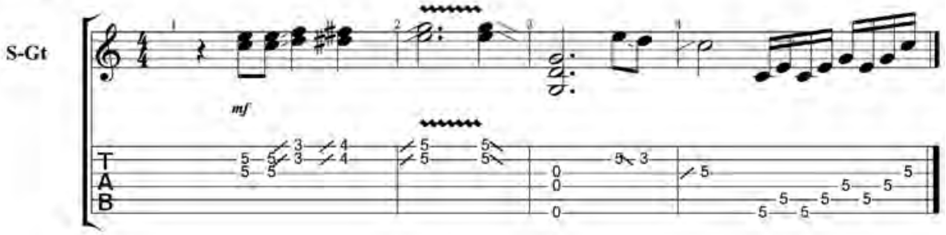
With this example you need to hammer on to some of the notes. Tilt the bar upwards and play each note with the tip.



EXAMPLE 1 - BLUEGRASS INTRO/OUTRO

Dobro Open G
①= D
⑤= B
⑥= G
♩ = 96

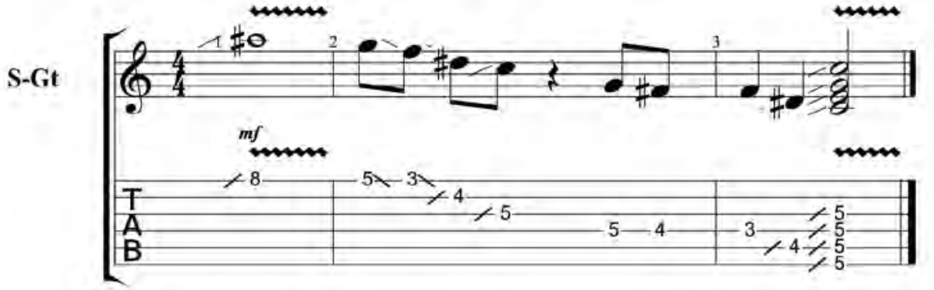
This is a fun passage, and is typical of many bluegrass songs. I've included a faster run at the end.



EXAMPLE 1 - JAZZ/BLUES LICK

Dobro Open G
①= D
⑤= B
⑥= G
♩ = 120

The entrance requires a rake across the strings. For this use your thumb and mute the strings with your left hand fingers.



around the globe. There are, of course, other excellent pickers. Rob Ickes, for example, is a phenomenally gifted player and the late, great Mike Auldridge was one of Jerry and Rob's inspirations for learning to play themselves. They, in turn, have been the inspiration for younger players, such as Mike Witcher.

YouTube is a wonderful way to discover and listen to some excellent Dobroists. The vast majority of the artists you see will be Americans playing traditional bluegrass music, sometimes at scarily fast tempos.

Let's take a look at some of the technical aspects of playing, starting with the set-up. Resonator cones and the bridge components are well known to rattle and buzz from time to time. Finding a UK-based technician who is confident to adjust things can be difficult. This kind of set-up is a bit of a dark art, but a well-adjusted Dobro sounds 100 per cent better than a poor one. In fact, finding a good quality squareneck Dobro in the UK isn't easy. I recommend the Gold Tone models, affordable and well set-up before shipping. Gold Tone works in partnership with reso specialists Beard Guitars, who produce some of the finest Dobros on the planet.

Because there's no need to worry about warping the neck, you can use really heavy gauge strings: 16-56 phosphor bronze sets are standard and easily available online.

The tone bars you'll need come in two different shapes: a Stevens bar, which has grooves running along its top and sides to help you grip it; and bullet bars, which have round noses and are more commonly used for electric lap and pedal steel.

Traditionally, Dobroists pick with their thumb, first and second finger. They wear picks in the same way that banjo players do. I am yet to get comfortable wearing these. As a compromise I wear fake acrylic nails. I would suggest you experiment wearing picks. Using only the flesh of your fingers seriously lacks attack and tone.

The standard tuning for Dobros is high bass G tuning: GBDGBD. This contains two octaves of a major triad and the bass strings mirror the treble ones, so whatever you play on the first three strings can be repeated on the bottom three. Capos are often used at the second fret when the song is in the key of A. Don't confuse this tuning with open G, which is used for bottleneck slide.

Another popular Dobro tuning is open D: DADF#AD. Lots of bluegrass songs are played in the key of G or D. The banjo is tuned to open G, too.

As with bottleneck slide, the ability to play perfectly in-tune is what separates players. I am relatively new to lap slide playing and found the transition from bottleneck challenging. Suddenly I couldn't play in tune anymore. It took hours of regular practice to improve. Ultimately, playing with other instruments is the answer. As with bottleneck, be careful not to add vibrato when listening for tuning problems. Work at playing the note spot-on first then bring in some vibrato when you're starting to feel a bit more confident.

String blocking is a key technique for Dobro players. You've got to be able to isolate one note at a time without the other strings ringing out and sounding messy. When playing licks you might also need to mute the previous string before playing the next one. It's tricky. Again, hours of dedication are necessary here. Tilting your bar up and using its tip can reduce the amount of blocking required because you're limiting the strings touching the bar.

I hope you have fun with these examples. Try expanding them into your own compositions. You can watch short videos of me playing them at my website. See you next time for a look at Weissenborn lap slide. ■

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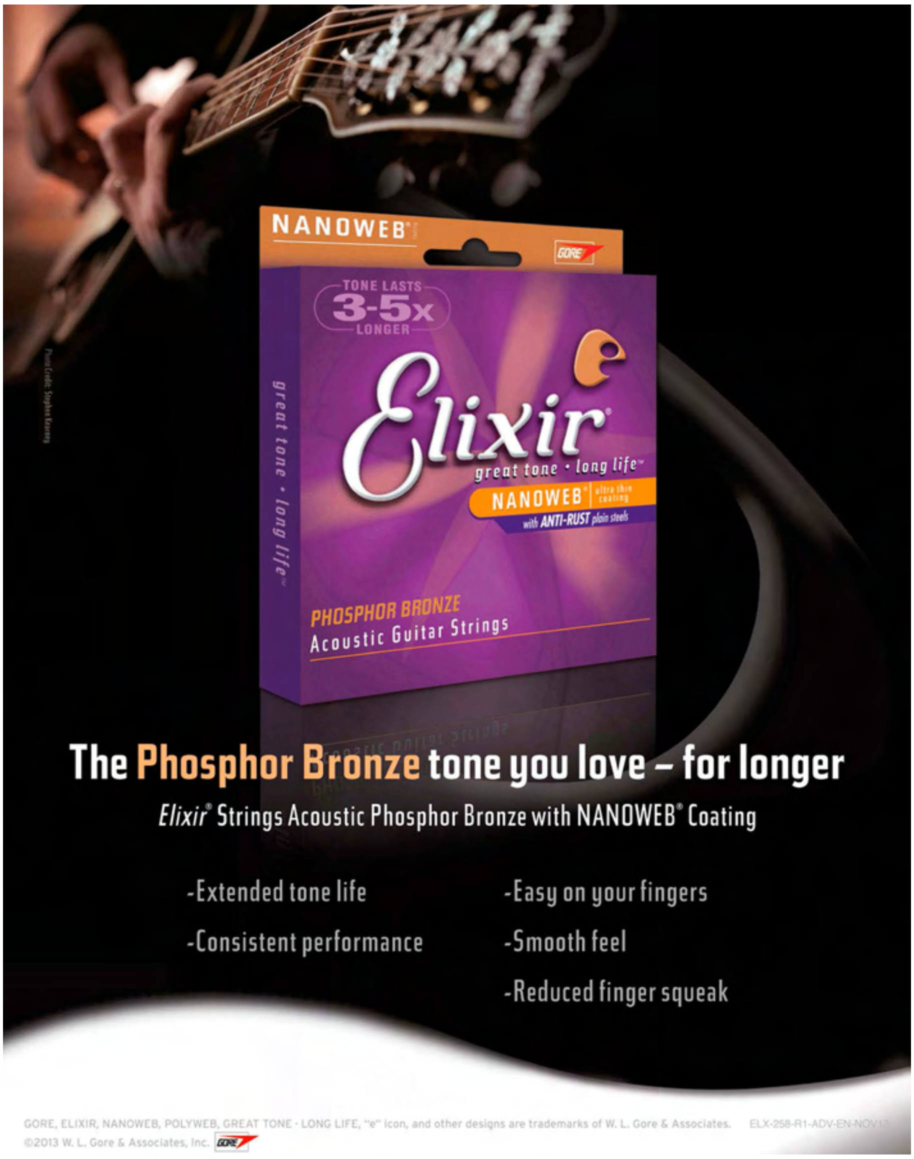

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THOMAS LEEB FINGERSTYLE VIRTUOSO

'OUT ON A LIMB'

Thomas explores a sliding section of 'Out On A Limb' from his album Trickster

TECHNIQUES SKILL LEVEL: ADVANCED

Last year, we took an in-depth look at the introduction of 'Out On A Limb' from my album *Trickster*, which is readily available from www.thomasleeb.com.

Now let's take a look at the main part (if you need a refresher on the tune, you can watch the video here: https://youtu.be/9GG6bq0C1fA). The tuning here is the ever-so versatile DADF#AE. If I may share a tuning anorak moment with you: DADF#AE strummed open is simply a D with the ninth on top, but I didn't want to be stuck in D yet again.

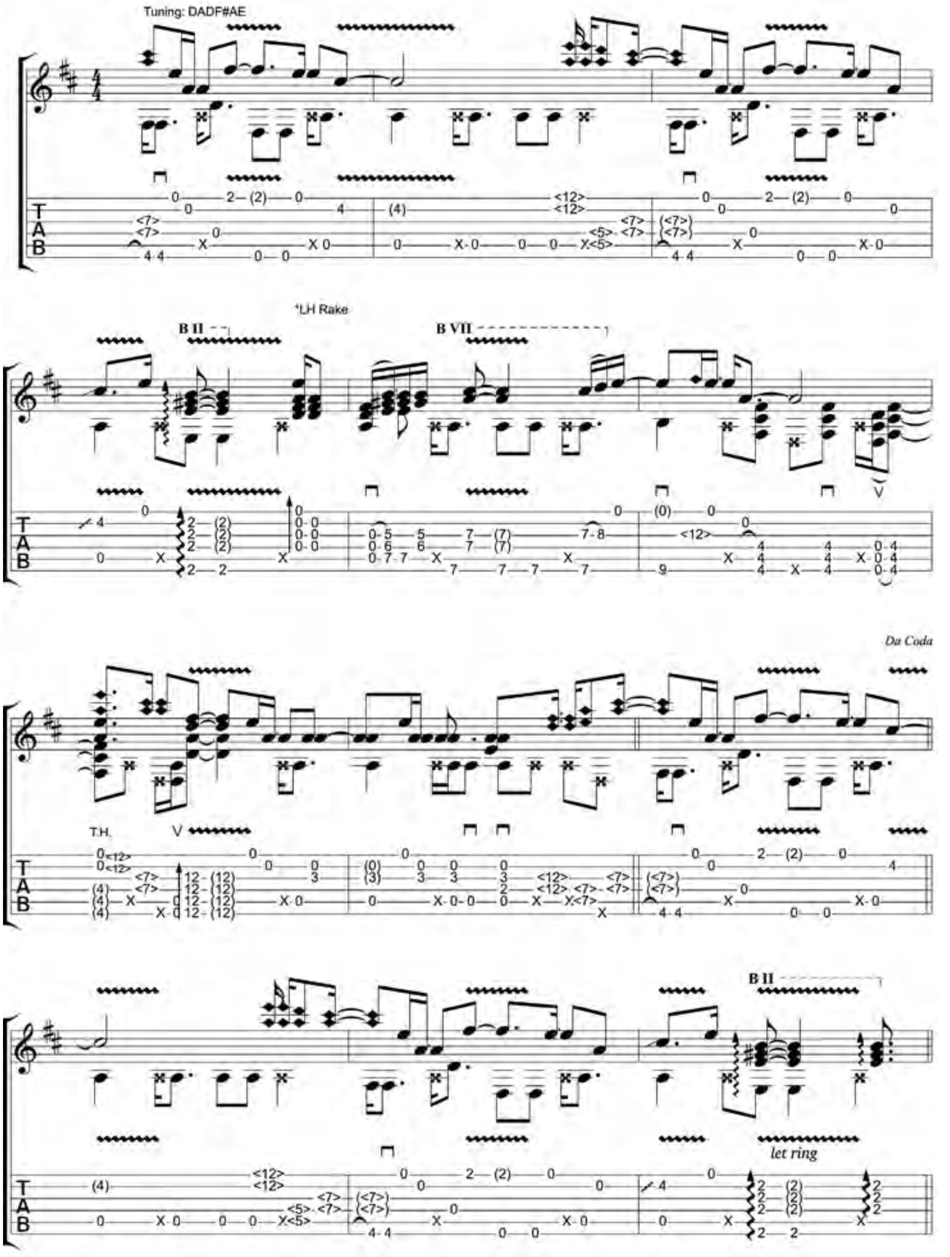
This tune is in the key of A, giving us many wonderful voicing and range options that would be unavailable if we'd stuck with the obvious D. Do look for non-obvious keys in open tunings, such as C or Bb in DADGAD, for example. You'll be amazed at what you'll find.

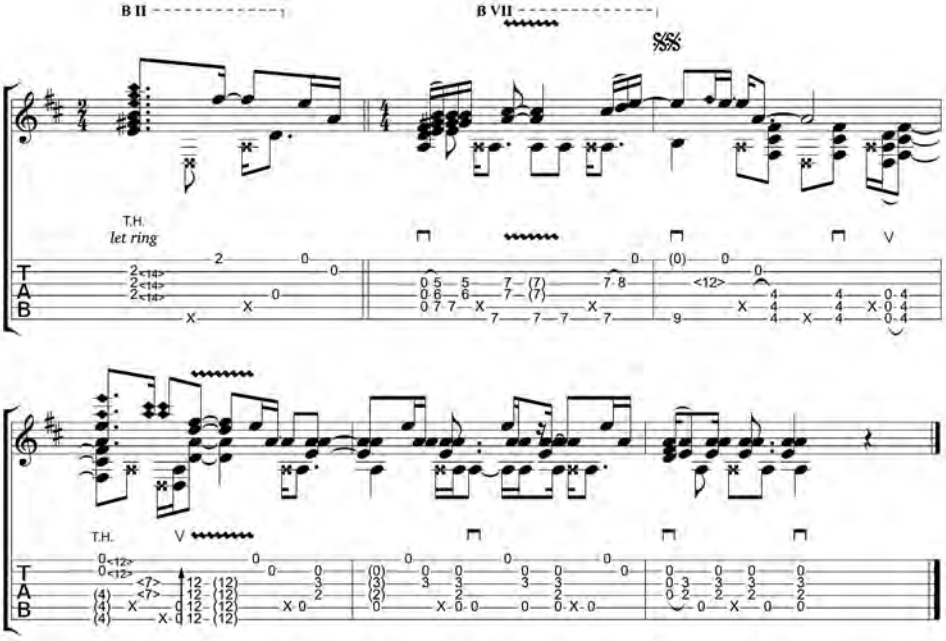
You didn't need the bottleneck in the intro we covered last year (unless you have an Ovation, in which case you definitely need a heavy bottleneck to make the percussion notes crack), but you will for this section. What I do after finishing the intro is reach in my pocket and slide the bottleneck on my finger. This occurs around 48 seconds into the video.

An X on the fifth string is what tells you to perform a string click, usually done by clicking your thumb on one of the bass strings. In bar six, we meet the bass thump, which is best executed as a gentle heel-of-your-hand thump on top, above the sound hole.

Whenever you see the wriggly line, which indicates a vibrato, you will need to use a bottleneck for that note. I keep the bottleneck on my ring finger, which frees up my index

'OUT ON A LIMB' – THOMAS LEEB

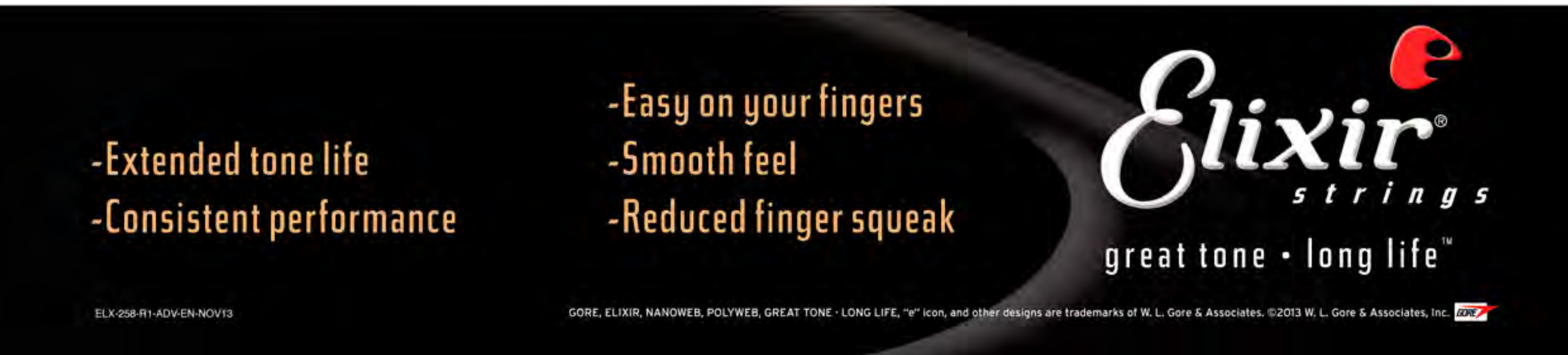




and middle finger to play the normally fretted notes. For good tone, it is vitally important to mute the strings behind the slide with your index and middle finger whenever you play bottleneck notes; muting that portion of the string eliminates many nasty metallic overtones. An exception to that rule can be found in the first bar on line three: when your bottleneck is on the 12th fret. Leaving the strings open can produce a neat chorus effect.

The slap/tap harmonics (TH on the tab) are simple Michael Hedges-type harmonic slaps: strike (and then release) the tip of your index finger directly on to the indicated fret to produce the harmonics. Some people prefer to use their middle finger.

Take it slow and enjoy. I hope you find much inspiration to write your own songs while working through it. ■



DANIEL HO GRAMMY WINNING UKULELE AND SLACK KEY GUITAR PLAYER

THE ART OF ARRANGING

Daniel shows us how to lift our guitar arrangements to the third dimension

TECHNIQUES SKILL LEVEL: INTERMEDIATE

© Richard Ecclestone

When arranging a piece of music for guitar, it is quite a feat to be able to play the melody and harmony simultaneously. This involves choosing a suitable key in which the melody and chords can be comfortably fingered. The most important consideration when choosing the best key for a guitar arrangement is to maximise the number of open strings. Since your left hand defines pitches on the fretboard, and open strings do not require fingering by the left hand, this allows it to focus on other parts of the arrangement such as the melody or harmony. Slack key guitar takes the concept of open strings a step further by retuning the guitar to pitches that allow for even more open strings in solo guitar playing. But guitar arranging does not need to stop there.

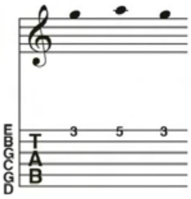
Composing an original arrangement for guitar is somewhat of a three-dimensional puzzle. The instrument has a limited polyphony of six and offers multiple ways of playing a melodic passage or chord. Pitches are determined by four fingers on the left hand (limited by their reach) and aided by available open strings. Beyond the two-dimensional approach of simply playing melody and chords, this chapter outlines three techniques that introduce a third dimension – that which makes a piece of music innovative and unique.

EXAMPLE 1

MOTIFS

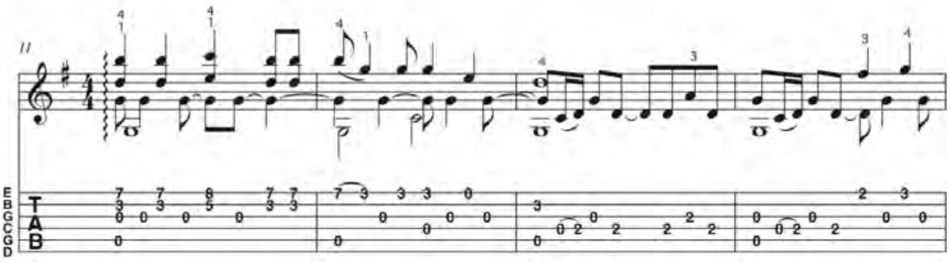
A motif is a short melodic theme that recurs throughout a piece. Weaving an original motif into a piece ties it together and adds cohesion to an arrangement. It engages a listener when the melody is not active, and most importantly, this compositional element is an artistic signature – something no other arrangement of that piece would have.

In my arrangement of ‘Hawai‘i Aloha’, I composed a three-note motif (which you can see in **example 1**).



EXAMPLE 2

It is used as the theme of the introduction and a counterpoint to the melody throughout the piece. The subtle recurrences of the motif gradually raise awareness of its presence. This is noticeable in measures 11-14 of ‘Hawai‘i Aloha’, which you can see in **example 2**.

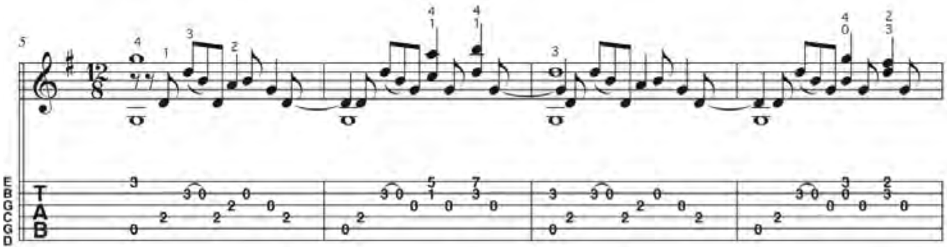


EXAMPLE 3

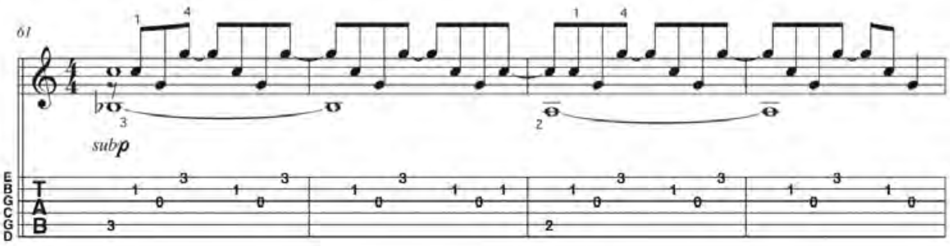
OSTINATO

An ostinato is a repeating musical figure. Continual repetition gradually places it in the background of a listener’s consciousness, allowing attention to be focused on elements that change such as the melody and harmony. It creates a subliminal energy. I used an ostinato in my arrangement of ‘Pupu A‘o ‘Ewa’.

It begins as the introduction and continues though the entire piece, with the exception of the solo section. The greatest challenge of this arrangement was maintaining the ostinato, melody and bass simultaneously. **Example 3**, measures five-eight of ‘Pupu A‘o ‘Ewa’, demonstrates this ostinato idea.



EXAMPLE 4



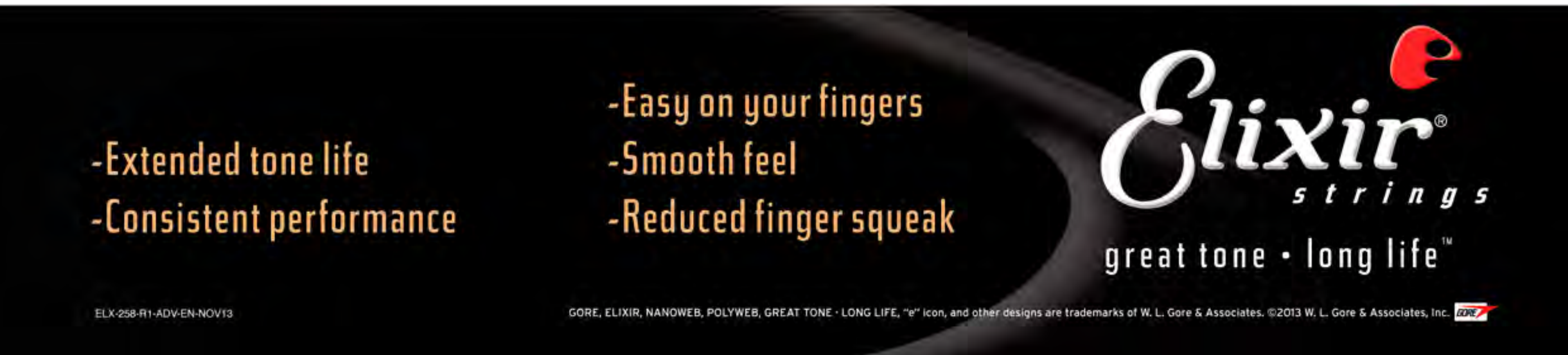
PEDAL POINT

This technique is traditionally defined as a low sustained note over which a passage is played. An inverted pedal point is a high sustained note or group of notes, and an internal pedal point is a sustained musical element in the middle register of a piece. Guitar strings do not sustain indefinitely, so it is often necessary to re-attack pedal points to sustain them through passages.

The following excerpt from ‘A World Away’ (**example 4**) is an example of an internal pedal point. The notes that are pedaled are G, C, and G, and they are played in a pattern that can also be considered an ostinato.

Motifs, ostinatos, and pedal points tend to reveal themselves during the process of arranging the basic melody and harmony. For example, a fragment of the melody’s main theme can be the perfect motif to weave throughout an arrangement; the rhythmic feel of a song can be played on available open strings to build an ostinato; or a bass note might not be reachable while playing the melody, so a pedal point on an open string might be the best solution. Spending time with an arrangement gives way to creative elements that may not be so apparent at first. The application of these musical techniques provide artists with a signature sound and style – a special dimension all their own. ■

The musical examples in this article are excerpts from the book *Slack Key Guitar: The G Kilauea Tuning*, which is available at danielho.com



CLIVE CARROLL ACOUSTIC VIRTUOSO

'MANHÃ DE CARNAVAL'

Clive Carroll takes us through a transcription of a Luiz Bonfá classic

FULL TAB ONLINE

TECHNIQUES SKILL LEVEL: INTERMEDIATE

Luiz Bonfá (1922-2001) was a Brazilian guitarist and composer, and 'Manhã de Carnaval' is widely considered to be one of his most important pieces. The title of this classic bossa nova literally translates as 'Morning of Carnival' and it is the main theme in the 1959 film *Black Orpheus*, directed by Marcel Camus.

The version printed here is a transcription from the Bonfá album *Solo in Rio 1959*.

To get a feel for the rhythmic foundation of this piece, practise the two-bar phrase in **example 1** until there is complete control of the groove.

All notes on the sixth and fourth strings are played with the thumb. Also, note the staccato indication on quavers two, four, six and eight. This is achieved by releasing the full pressure of the fretting hand immediately after plucking the strings. The Xs are a percussive effect which is created by hitting down on the strings with tips of the plucking-hand fingers. For reference, have a listen to the audio example of this at: *www.clivecarroll.co.uk/acoustic-magazine.html*.

The transcription opens with a five-bar introduction. In bar one, use fingers one, two and four for the first chord and flatten the first finger to cover the following E# on string two.

In bar two, this fret-hand shape shifts down two frets. Bar three is similar to bar one and the last three melodic quavers lead into a barre chord of A minor at the start of bar four. While the timing of bars one to three is fairly loose, a sense of pulse is established through bars four and five in preparation for the main melody, which begins with the last note in bar five.

Once the chord shapes have been learned throughout the piece, from here on the rhythmic feel should be understated, yet solid, while the melody sings clearly above. This is an important part in the essence of the bossa nova sound.

Bars 20 and 21 are a little tricky as the high Es on string one should ring over the fretted notes on strings two, three and four. Try using fingers two, three and four in bar 20 and keep them as upright as possible. In bar 21 place the low B on string five only before adding fingers two and four on the following A and F#. Slow practice is also essential in bar 26, where the higher three strings can be fretted with fingers two, three and four.

The fretted notes of the chord in quaver-beat two of bar 31 shift up to the fifth, then seventh position. Plucking this figure nearer to the bridge will create an attacking "ponticello" colour similar to the original Bonfá recording.

Bar 33 contains a palm muted, ascending arpeggio figure and the picking-hand thumb is used throughout. To ensure clarity, practise raking the thumb from the low F on string six to the C on string two, before individually plucking the final D, F and high A.

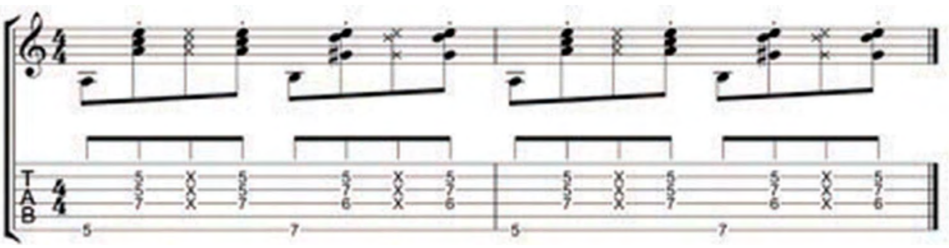
A tag is heard in bars 37-42. This has a triplet feel for the most part but the phrase can be played in less-strict time. Importance should be directed towards the shaping of the melodic line.

The four-note chords in bars 40, 41, 42 and the final bar are plucked with fingers *p*, *i*, *m* and *a*. The finger spacing of the picking hand may feel unusual at first, but ultimately the non-arpeggiated, attacking colour is of stylistic importance.

I have recorded a slightly slower version of 'Manhã de Carnaval' to accompany this article which can be found at: *www.clivecarroll.co.uk/acoustic-magazine.html*.

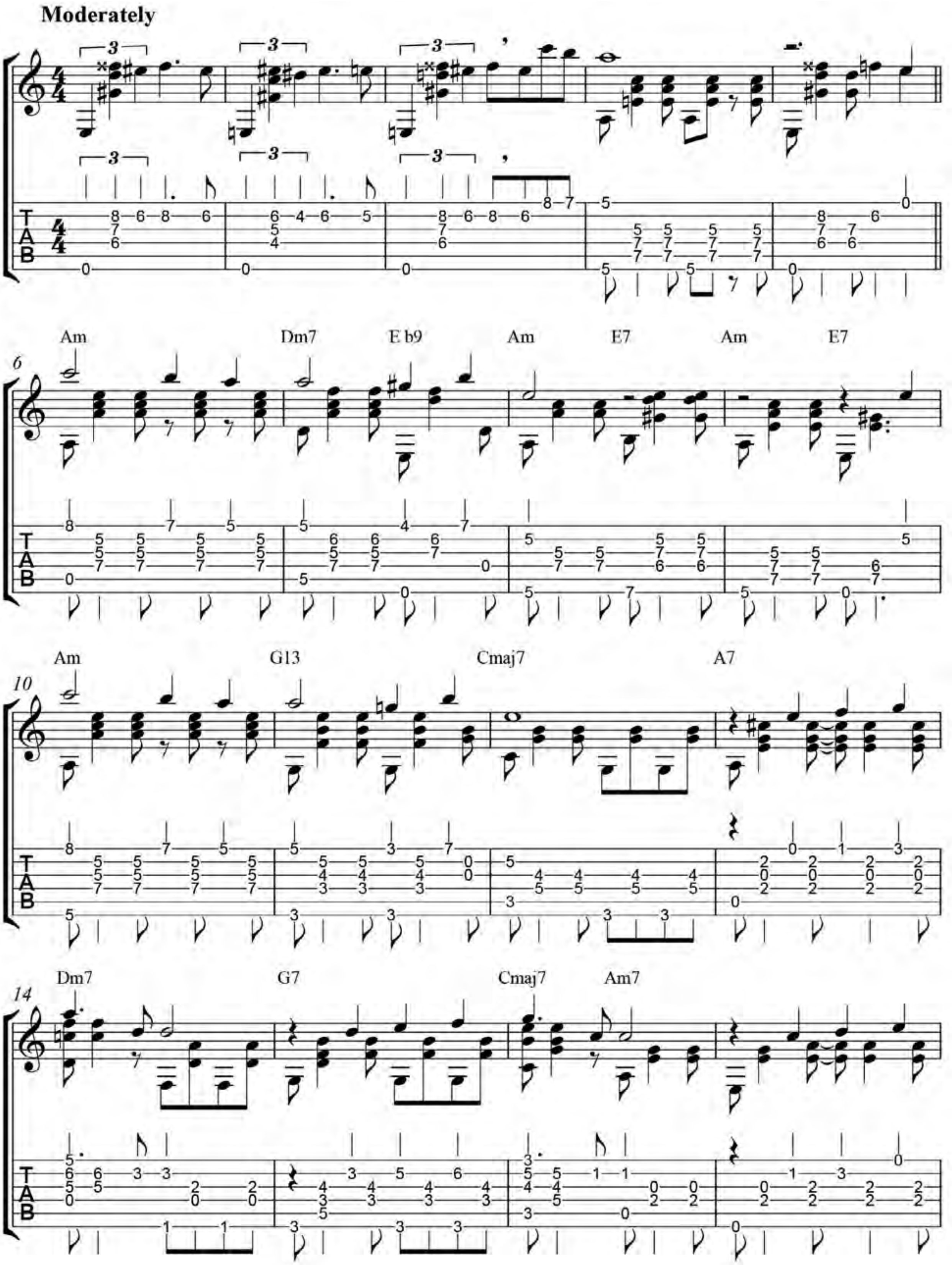
I hope you find the recording useful and I very much hope that you enjoy learning this bossa nova classic! ■

EXAMPLE 1



> **"The finger spacing of the picking hand may feel unusual, but ultimately the attacking colour is of stylistic importance"**

MANHÃ DE CARNAVAL



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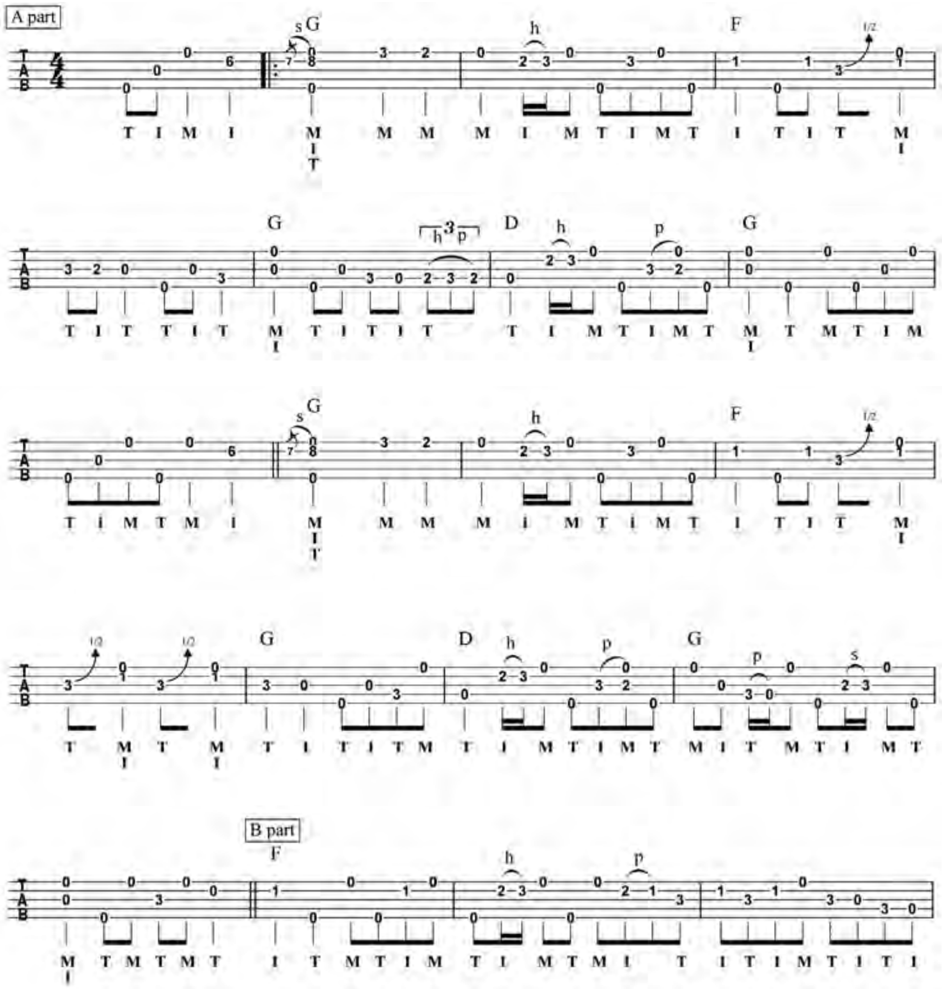
LEON HUNT UK BANJO EXPERT

'BODUM'

Leon puts a bit more 'blue' in bluegrass

TECHNIQUES SKILL LEVEL: INTERMEDIATE

'BODUM' - KEY OF G



On a short but eventful trip to North Carolina back in 1989, I experienced something of a musical epiphany. I'd bumped into George Buckner, an amazing young North Carolinian banjo player, a few weeks earlier at the Edale Bluegrass festival in Derbyshire. George and Greg, the bass player from his band, were holidaying in the UK and had decided to experience a British bluegrass festival. George and I didn't actually meet each other until the Sunday afternoon but hit it off immediately. We spent a good couple of hours trading tunes and chatting (but mostly trading tunes). George's last words before I had to reluctantly jump into my car and drive back home to the West Country were, "Come over and stay next month, there's a great festival near to me."

Four weeks later I was at the Denton Bluegrass Festival in North Carolina. Denton might as well have been a million miles away from that damp farm field in Derbyshire. Almost every name on the bill represented an important part of my record collection, but by far the best bit for me, life changing in fact, were the late night jam sessions. Because of the crippling heat and humidity (even the locals looked like they were melting) most of the serious picking happened well after dark.

The majority of the players in those sessions were, like myself, young, wide-eyed, enthusiastic and, I'm not particularly proud to say, hugely competitive. It's difficult to describe just how good the level of playing was in those sessions, but suffice to say, many of the musicians in attendance are now themselves middle-aged, established 'names' in bluegrass music. A young Scott Vestal, now the banjo player in the Sam Bush Band, seemed to be leading something of a revolution among the banjo players, with his modern and slightly bluesy take on Scruggs style. I'd never heard anything like it. All the drive and punch of traditional bluegrass banjo but with some really twisty, unexpected and imaginative additions. I couldn't wait to get back and try to learn how to do it.

On my return to the UK, I feverishly set about dissecting the playing on the recordings I'd made from the sidelines of those late-night sessions. The tablature here is of 'Bodum', a bluesy mid-tempo bluegrass tune I wrote several years back. It clearly illustrates the impact that weekend and the ensuing months had on my playing.

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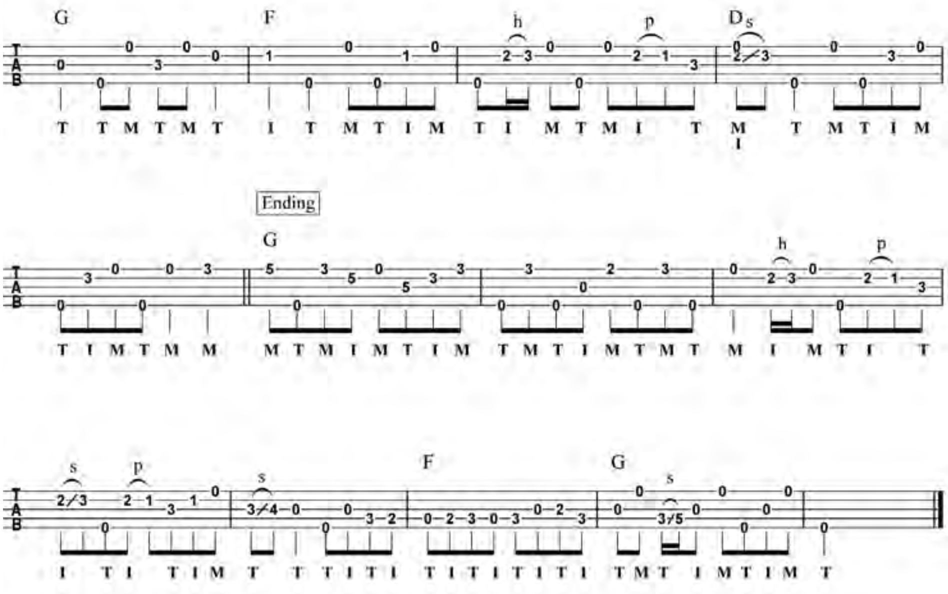
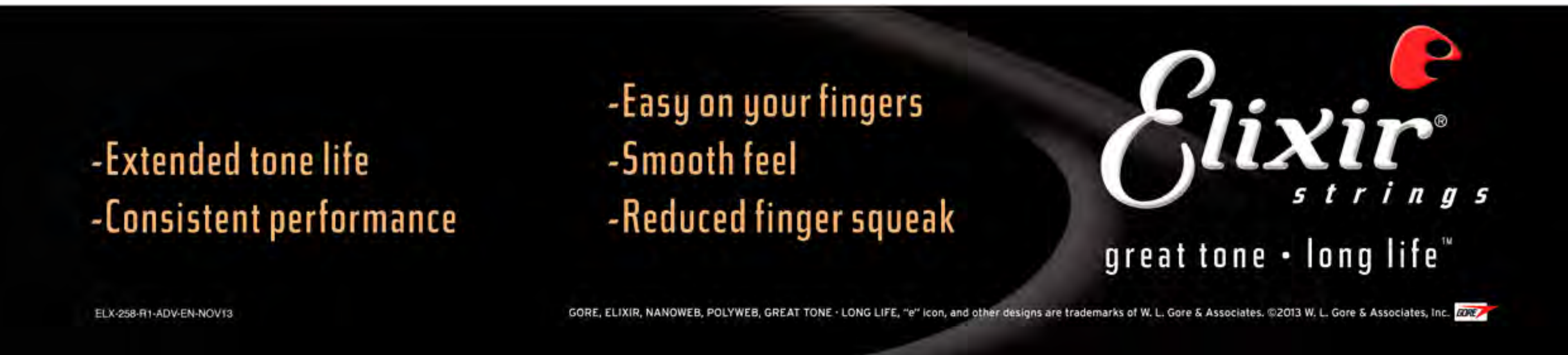


Before getting stuck into the tab there are a couple of things I should point out: this driving, bluesy sound is largely achieved by not dwelling for too long on any 3rds (major or minor). When one does inevitably crop up, the distinction between it being 'natural' or 'flatted' is usually blurred. As is the case with a lot of Appalachian music, the sound lives in a kind of ambiguous hinterland between the major and the minor by leaning heavily on roots, 5ths and flatted 7ths. On the odd occasions that a 3rd does appear, it's usually brief, and often in a state of flux; either being bent or slid up from the minor to the major, or ornamented from the minor 3rd to the major 2nd.

Another important part of this sound, and probably one of the things that appealed to me the most, was the angry sounding pull-off from the second to the first fret on the second string (look at bars two and three of the B section). This phrase and its seemingly infinite number of permutations, created to suit whatever musical environment you might need it to work in, forms a big part of this style.

Like many tunes of this ilk, 'Bodum' uses a lot of right hand pinches (picking two or three strings simultaneously) to punctuate and accentuate the melody. Pinches come in three basic forms; thumb and middle finger, index and middle finger and all three digits at once. Pinches offer one of the most powerful and punchy techniques we as banjo players have at our disposal. If, however, the notes aren't played perfectly in sync with one another, or are played with uneven velocity, the effect is lost completely and will make the music sound messy and lacking in punch.

If all this grabs you as much as it did me, beyond listening to any one of the numerous banjo players that now do it so well, I would highly recommend studying some of the great bluegrass guitarists, especially Tony Rice. I'm fairly sure that banjo players like Scott Vestal started on this path by doing just this, modifying and adjusting guitar licks and phrases to suit the banjo and its associated three-fingered rolls. To take this a step further, I would generally encourage the practice of taking on ideas and adapting vocabulary from instruments other than your own. This will generally yield more interesting and imaginative results and should push you ever closer to developing your own distinctive style. ■



CHRIS WOODS CONTEMPORARY ACOUSTIC GROOVE PLAYER

PRE-SHOW RITUALS

Chris tells us what gets him connected to his guitar and ready for a show

TECHNIQUES SKILL LEVEL: SUITABLE FOR ALL

Since launching 'Guitar Revolution' many of the conversations I've had with guitarists have focused on preparing for performance. To me, aside from actually just constructively practising, how you warm up before your performance can be crucial. Ultimately, after hours and hours of hard work, those precious moments before walking on stage can undo so much of that groundwork – so ignore it at your peril. In this column let's look at how you can really make the most of those magical pre-show moments.

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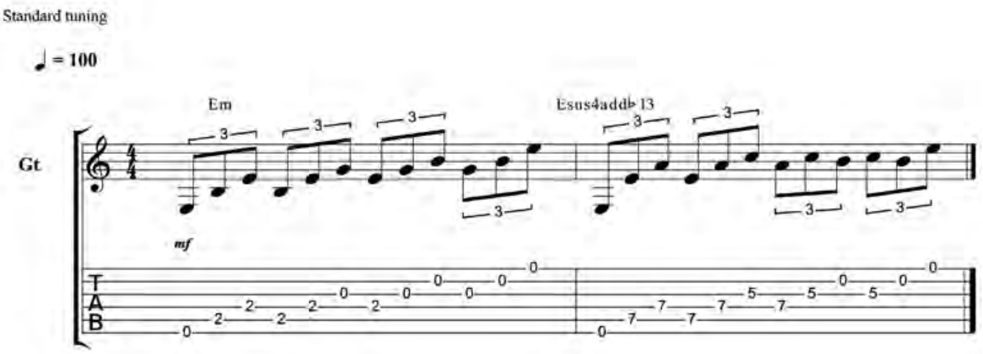
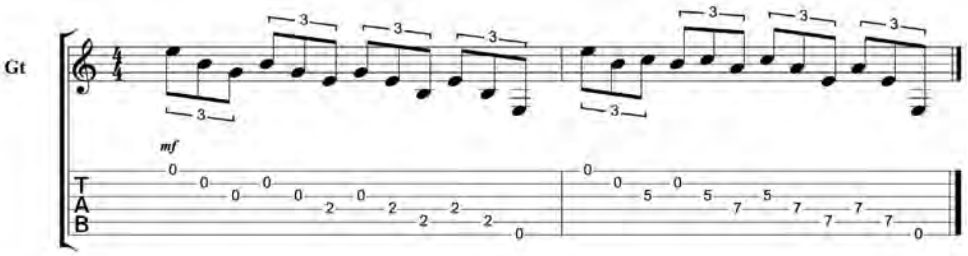
EXAMPLE 1



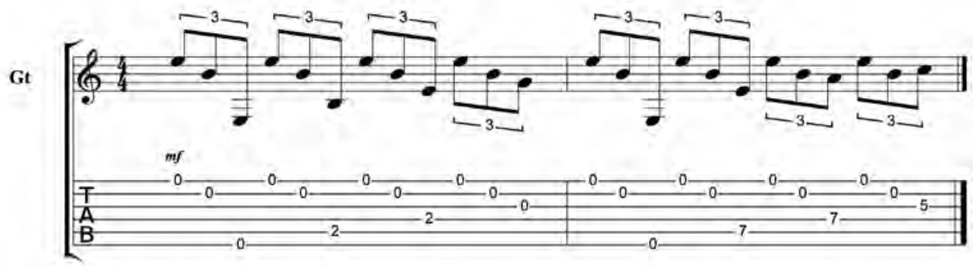
EXAMPLE 2



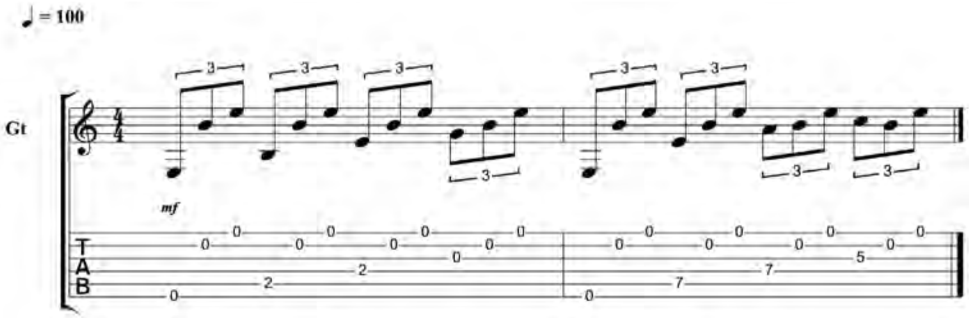
The more I perform the more I realise that mindset is everything before walking on stage. Desperately running through the performance tunes often has a negative effect for me. To my mind, if you've put the time in, your muscle memory will kick in. As long you are connected to your guitar you can ultimately 'zone out', enjoy playing and let that previous practice flow – while also relaxing your muscles.

So how do we connect to the guitar, and in fact what do we mean by this? Well, we all experience that moment when you pick up the guitar and it feels alien, nothing seems to be working and your fingers aren't behaving themselves. This isn't anything to do with how good you are, or indeed even how much you've practised. It's to do with how 'tuned-in' you are. Think about it, you are at your best when you've been playing for hours undisturbed, that time when everything flows. Those moments are when you are what psychologists call 'in flow', when you are completely focused and connected to what you're doing. Every note you play on the guitar has an almost infinite number of variables,

EXAMPLE 3



EXAMPLE 4



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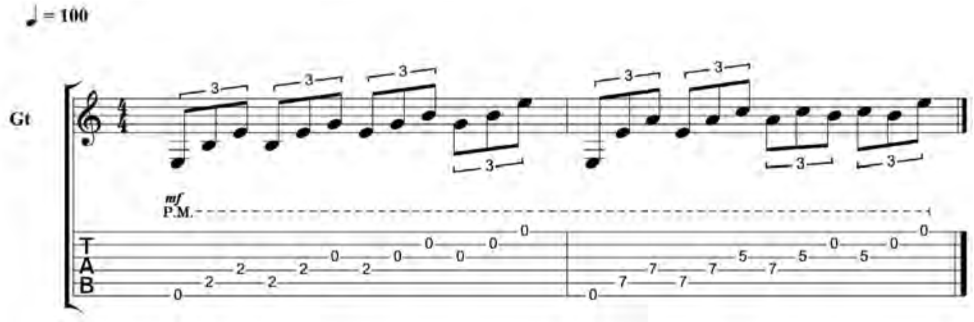
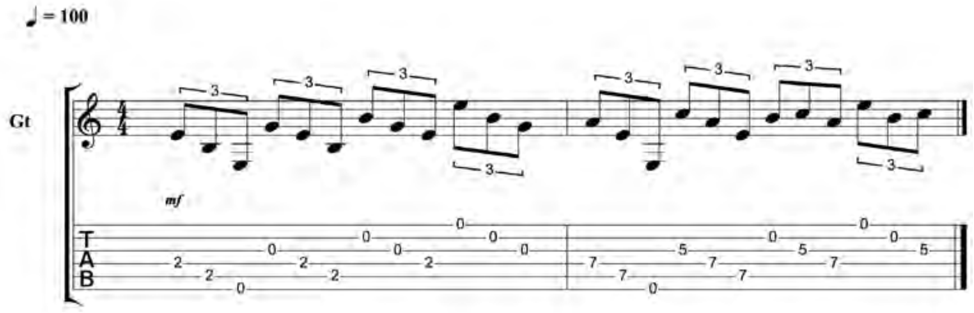


EXAMPLE 6



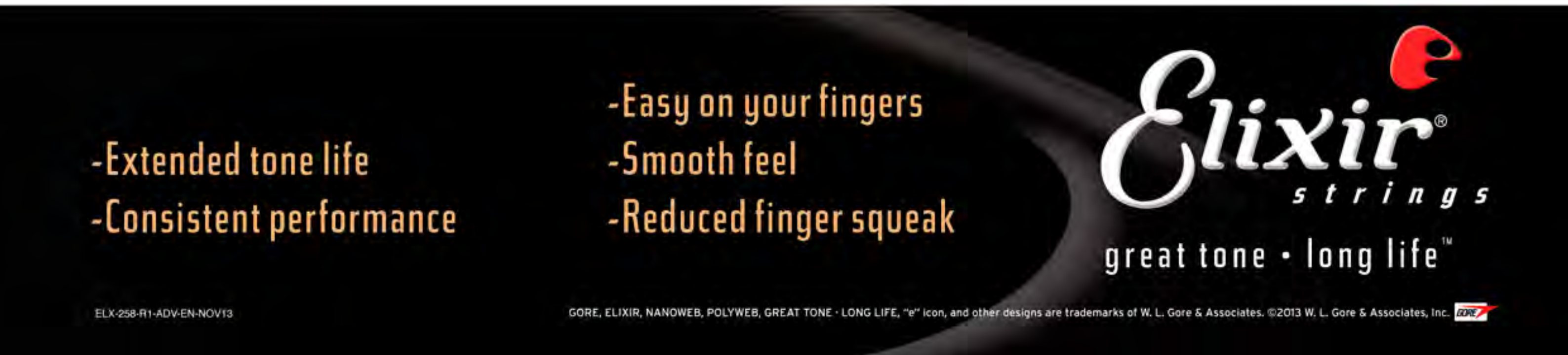
> **"The more I perform the more I realise that mindset is everything before walking on stage"**

from velocity to tone, from intonation to decay, so you need to calibrate your brain. Move it away from bills, TV advertising, washing up, driving, conversations and any other distraction, and engage it in guitar.

I think the best way to achieve this, short of lighting incense sticks and meditating, (which seriously shouldn't be laughed at) is to work through a set of repetitive patterns that are simplistic enough not to add stress or tension and complex enough to demand your focus. This can be done in a matter of minutes or even a matter of seconds.

In this column I have set out six different examples, or patterns, all based around triplet patterns (using two chords). Why triplets? Well, they are complex enough to demand that focus and by sticking to one repetitive rhythm, it helps you maintain that focus and guides your mind into that 'flow' state.

Playing them with pick or fingers is fine, but be sure to play them in the same way each time. This process will give your brain the opportunity to 'calibrate'. If you play the same example in a different way, you will simply be forcing your mind to engage a fresh challenge each time, which in turn stops you from being able to focus on those beautiful and microscopic details that make music so incredible. Crucially, this isn't a speed exercise, so don't simply attempt to build up speed; instead, stick to a comfortable speed, focus on detail and, of course, on relaxing. ■



PAUL BRETT VINTAGE GUITAR EXPERT AND 12-STRING AFICIONADO

FULL TAB ONLINE

12-STRING CORNER

The string options for 12-string players may not be as limited as feared, says Paul Brett

TECHNIQUES SKILL LEVEL: SUITABLE FOR ALL

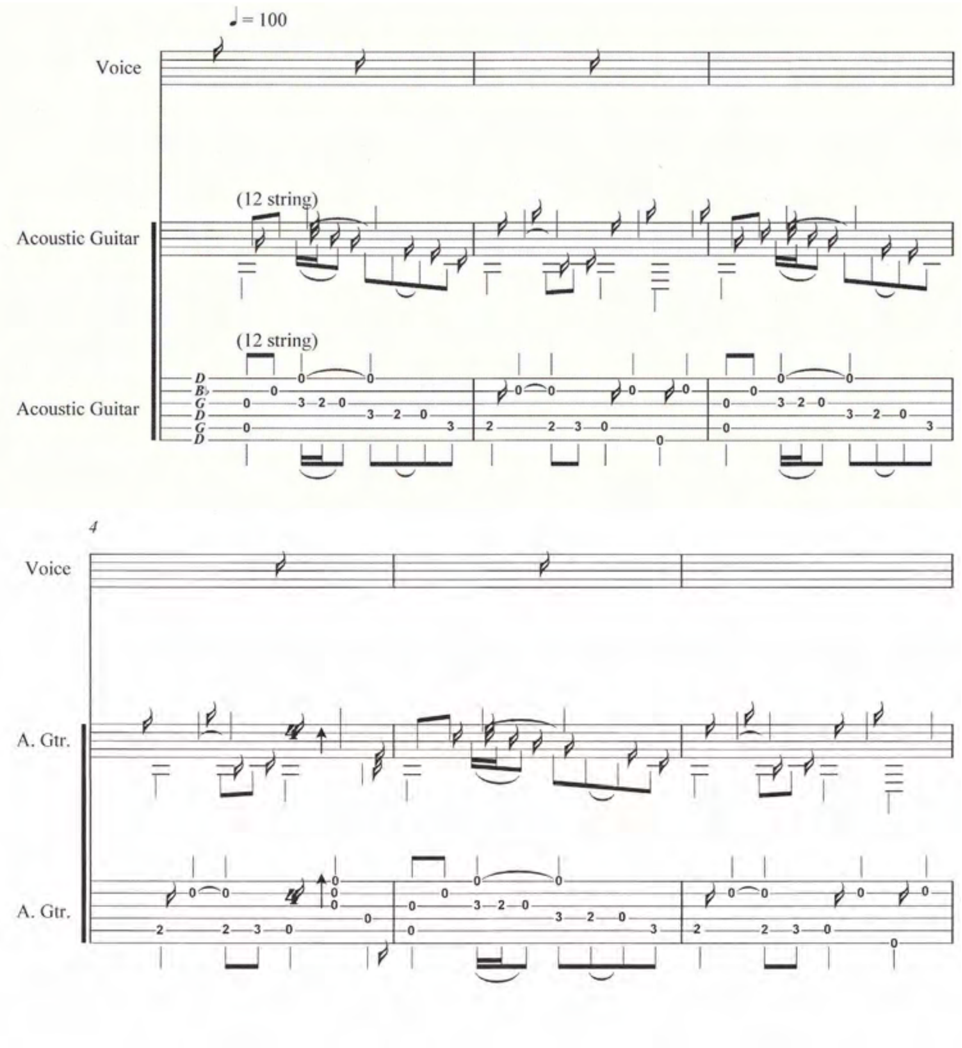
So many people ask me what strings I use for my 12-string guitars – or what they should use on theirs. The simple answer is: it depends on your guitar and the music you play. This can be initially a bit of an expense as sets of 12 strings are more expensive than sets of six, but really, is it a worthwhile exercise? The other thing to consider is that if you are amplifying your acoustic 12-string, strings that sound good when unplugged may not sound as good when amplified. So you see, it's not an easy route to get right.

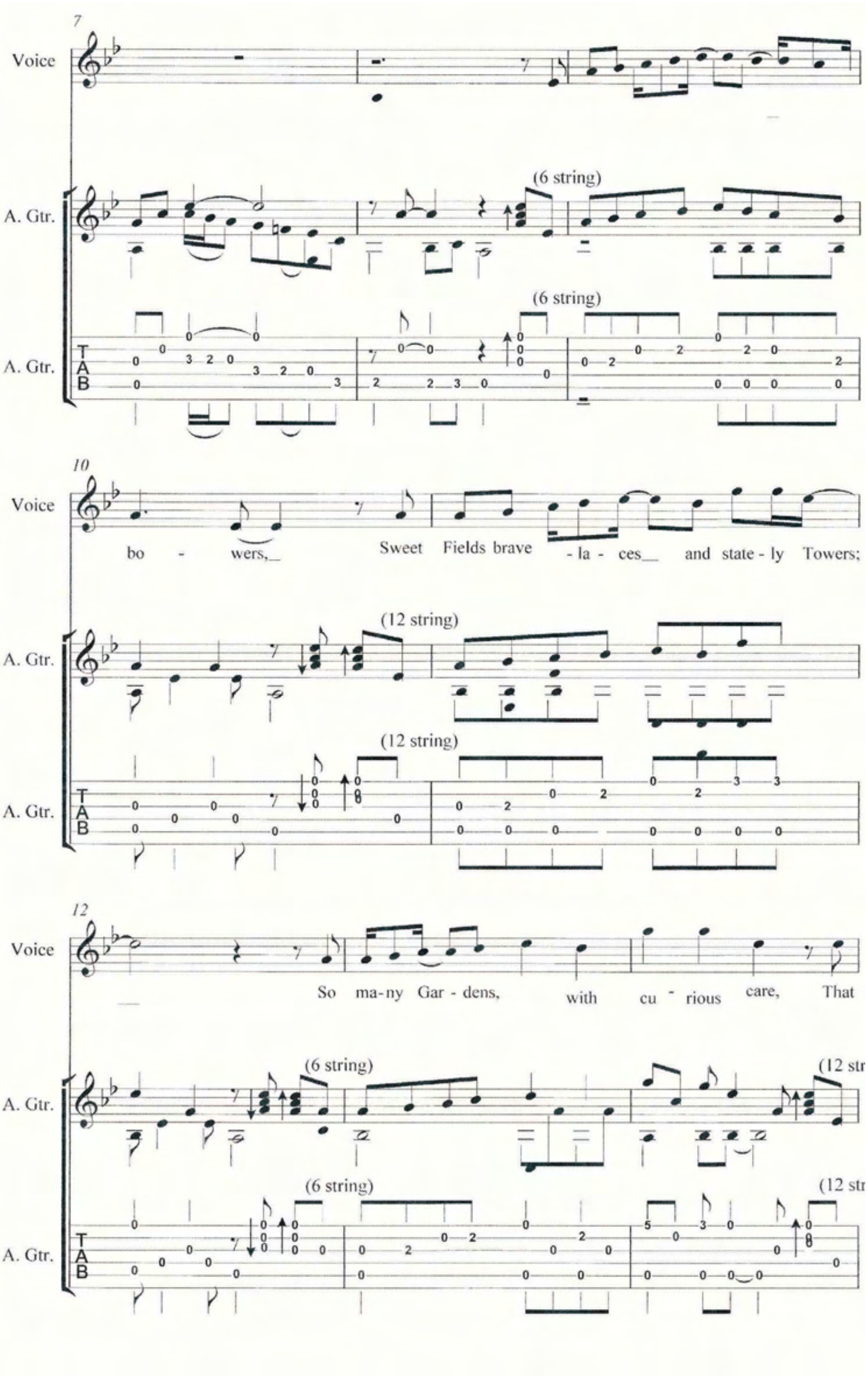
A friend of mine recently was going to sell his 12-string because he couldn't get the right sound for blues. I had some spare sets of strings so I changed them from the 0.10 to 0.47 gauges he was using to 0.12 to 0.54 gauges, loosened off the neck a half turn, tuned it down a tone (with a dropped low E pair down a further tone), and now he's a very happy bunny.

Regardless of make or price, every individual acoustic guitar is different. The same applies to six-strings and the journey of getting the right strings, neck action and sound for your particular style of playing should be paramount in your attitude. I had another mate who went through six guitars before he was moderately happy with the final one, when a change of strings and a visit to a good luthier for an action set-up would have sufficed for the first one he purchased!

Over the years, I have changed or tested many strings on both 12- and six-string acoustics and still have never settled on one particular brand, although like my good friend Gordon Giltrap, Martin strings are more favourable on both my 12- and six-strings these days. You must also remember that the process of making strings is constantly changing, as are the materials used, so the science is not a static concept by any means. Price too is a wide arm stretch, with all manner of accompanying publicity from companies as to why their strings are the best. Ignore it. What's best is what suits you, not them, and of course what you can afford. It's also worth noting that strings need a settling in period to

'OF RIVERS' – PAUL BRETT



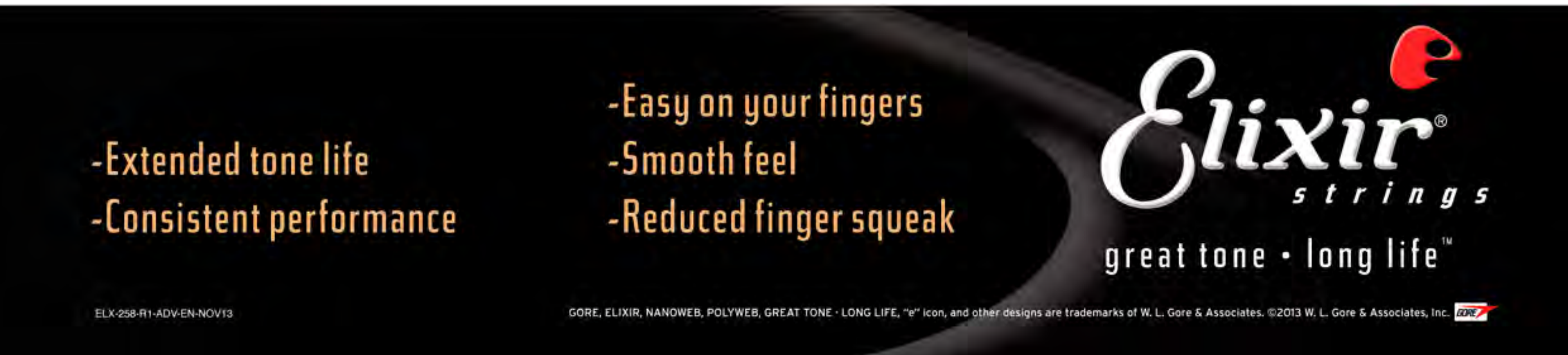


"I had mate who went through six guitars before he was moderately happy, when a change of strings and an action set-up would have sufficed for the first one he purchased!"

reach any kind of normality in the bonding process with the guitar itself. Another consideration is to look at the saddle and nut construction and materials.

As an example, the first prototype of my new Viator 12-string came over to me from Vintage and the intonation, especially on the second string, was sharp at the D position. The saddle that it came with was a compensated one and I replace it for a non-compensated one with some helpful collaboration from Nathan at the Vintage technical department, and this cured the problem immediately with a modicum of effort and a lot of experience! It is now sounding absolutely stunning as you can hear from the video I posted on YouTube (http://youtu.be/J3puEO9TN0o).

Another tip is the fact that it takes about a couple of weeks usually for the strings to settle down. Once they settle and lose that squeaky noise on the wound strings and the tension has ceased moving in slight pitch, you should get some reasonable life out of them. It's also advisable to check the intonation and string spacing between each individual string and its respective twin is behaving as it should. I played quite a few 12-strings over the years where the intonation on fixed bridges, if not set correctly in the first place, caused major pitch issues when fretting up the neck, so it's worth checking that out too. My 12-string song for the month is a 16th century traditional poem, which I set to music, entitled 'Of Rivers'. Enjoy! ■



MATT STEVENS INSTRUMENTAL COMPOSER

TAKING A REST

Matt preaches the value of leaving space for your loops to breathe

TECHNIQUES SKILL LEVEL: SUITABLE FOR ALL

When you listen to a great public speaker you'll notice they use a range of dynamics as they address the crowd. They might emphasise one part of a sentence or pause for a reaction from the audience. After all who would want to listen to someone who used the same level tone throughout? Often gaps are done for effect and to elicit a response – gaps in music can be just as effective. When you're looping, a gap of a bar or a rest within a bar can make all the difference in a chord sequence. If you listen to Led Zeppelin, their music often featured pauses in sections for dramatic effect or within the riffs themselves. Jimmy Page once said of Zeppelin drummer John Bonham's work on 'Kashmir': "It was what he didn't do that made it work." Leaving space gives your music the opportunity to breathe, and you can always fill these rests with interesting musical parts as you build up the loops live.

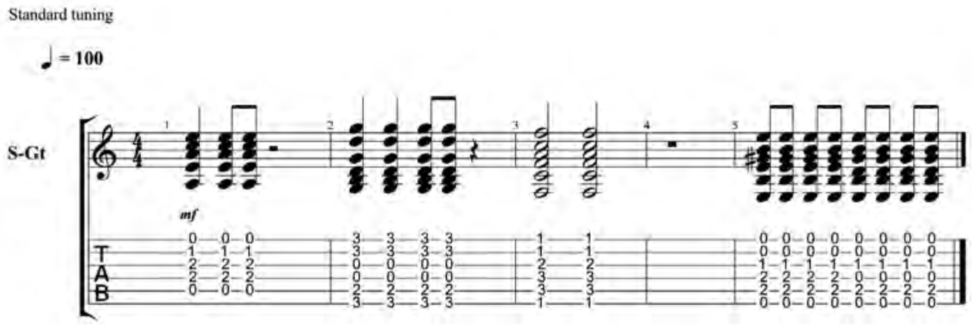
Hit loop record on your loop pedal and record in **example 1**. Notice the rests in the loop: I've deliberately kept the chords themselves (Am, G, F, E) relatively simple to allow you to focus on the rhythm. When leaving a gap when recording a loop, try to count the gap or use your foot to keep the rhythm going. As ever, use a metronome to practise the part if you struggle to keep time when counting the rests. After a while it will feel natural to co-ordinate your feet on the loop pedal and count the gaps when recording a loop.

Example 2 features the chords in a different position higher up the neck. Focus on feeling the rhythm: **example 2** should be perfectly locked in with the loop in **example 1**. This will be a real test of how in time your original loop is. Hit the loop record button on your loop pedal and record **example 2** over the loop you have already created in **example 1**. In performance you can allow this loop to play around for a while as you play a solo or vocal part over the top before you add any more layers.

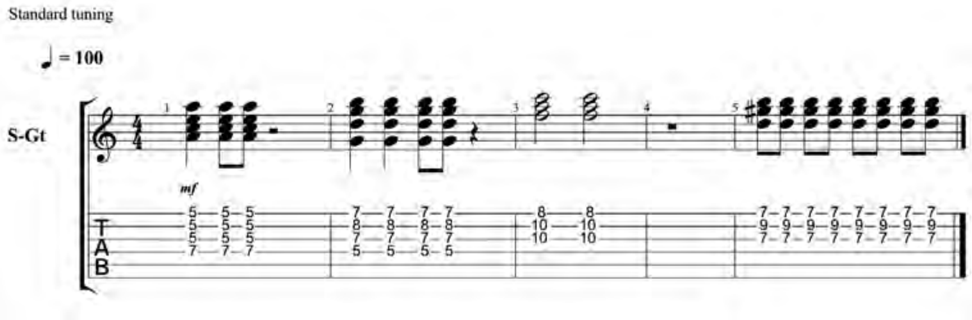
If you're singing, you could use the loop we have created as a chorus and use the rests in the chord sequence to add a vocal hook. Some songwriters work from the chord sequence and rhythm first and then add a melody; some work the other way round. If you find yourself using one particular method for writing songs, try and swap and compose chords or melody first, whatever is opposite to your usual working method. As ever, experiment with as many different methods of working. As this should lead to different and hopefully more interesting results, it's easy to fall into standard working practices.

Now we can start to fill in the gaps as we build up the loop over the course of the performance. When presenting loops live it's sometimes useful to explain to the audience that it isn't a backing track, you can stop and

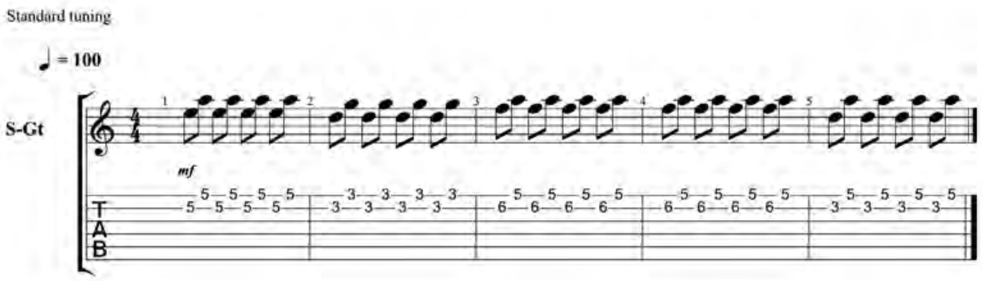
EXAMPLE 1



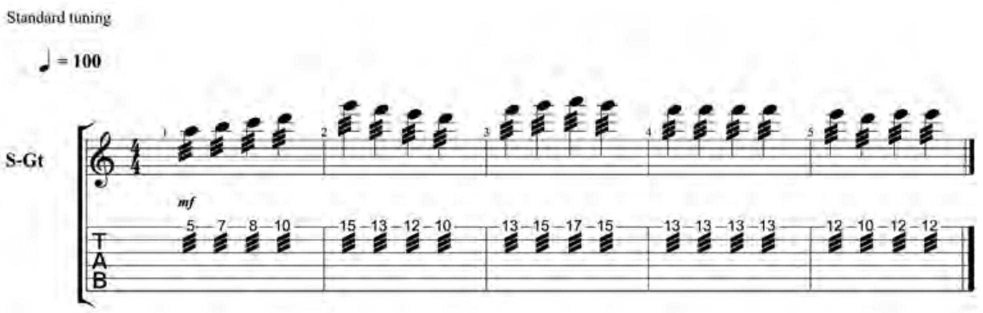
EXAMPLE 2



EXAMPLE 3



EXAMPLE 4



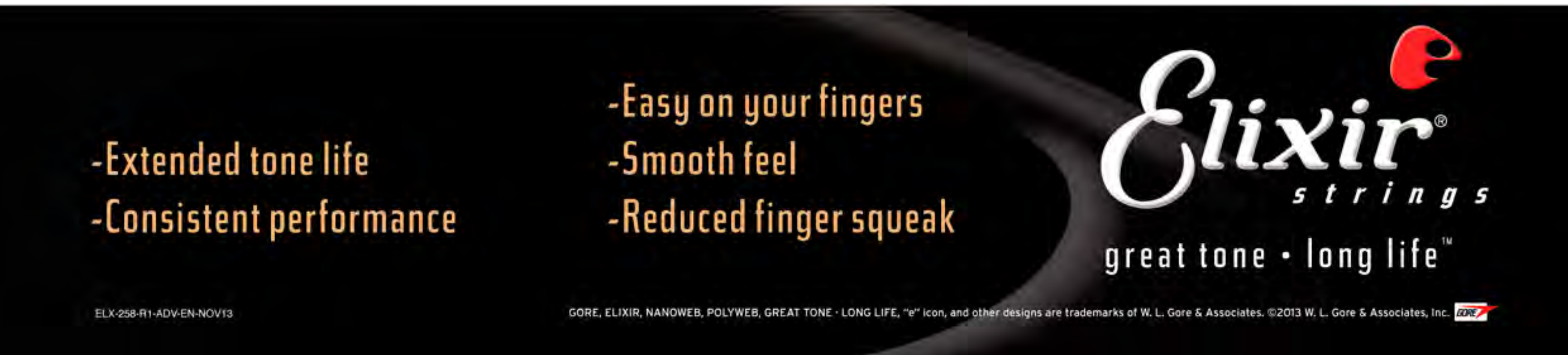
> **"On many of the classic guitar riffs and parts, it's the space in them that makes them memorable"**

start the parts on the pedal to illustrate this or remove parts – anything to show it's not pre-recorded. **Example 3** is like the hi-hat part on a drum kit playing eighth notes – it fills in the gaps and starts to build up the rhythm. If you're building this loop up under a vocal part or a lead guitar solo, you could add this later in the song to add interest. It should give things a lift.

Example 4 adds an overdub to the loop with some tremolo picked guitars. Tremolo picking is a rapid combination of up and down strokes that can make for a dramatic ending to a song. This technique can take a while to master and keep perfectly in time, but it's worth it.

Don't add all your layers at the start of the song – build it up gradually like the arrangement of a classic pop record. As ever, George Martin's work with the Beatles is always worth a listen to inspire arrangements, even if you're only working with a guitar and loop pedal. You can use a volume pedal to create fake string sounds by fading them in alongside a reverb pedal and play percussion parts by hitting the body of your guitar. Allow things to build naturally.

If you listen to many of the classic guitar riffs and parts it's the space in them that makes them memorable. Radiohead's song 'The Bends' is a great example of space in a riff, as is the Rolling Stones' 'Start Me Up'. Rests create interest and help to build good grooves and hooks for your songs. ■



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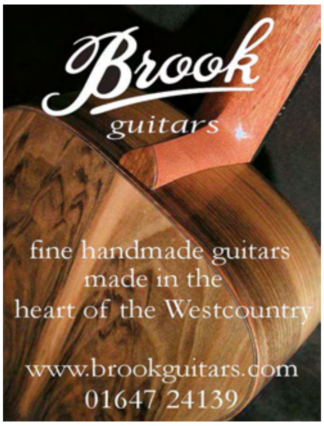

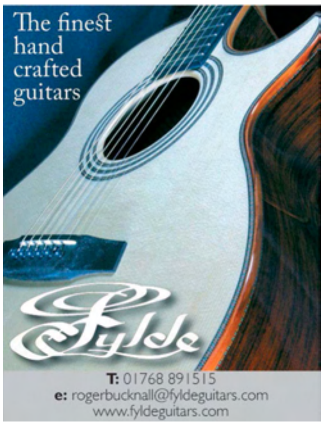

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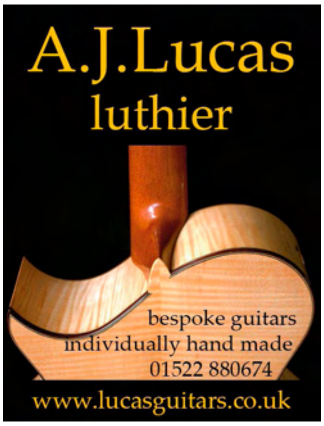

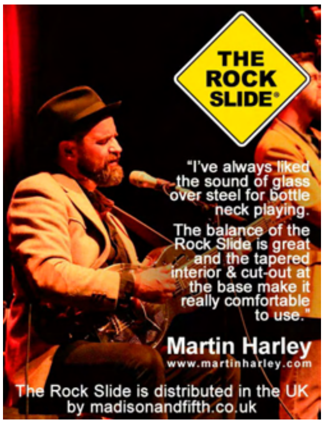

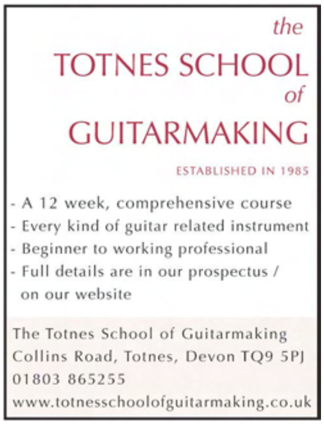

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NEIL FINN

WORDS: TERI SACCONE IMAGE: MIKE WALEN

When a musician satisfies both artistic and commercial appetites – on his own terms – that achievement justifiably earns him star accolades that defy genre. Singer-songwriter Neil Finn has accomplished this in spades, all while writing breathtaking melodies bound with deeply relatable lyrics. Finn's musicality is deeply imbued by the spirit of Lennon and McCartney and others of that ilk who informed and inspired his long and fruitful career. From his tenure with 80s pop rockers Split Enz, his co-formation of Crowded House and enduring solo career, Finn has always been the kind of musician who makes his output look effortless and organic; in reality, writing and performing music that captures what Carlos Santana calls the 'universal tone' is anything but easy.

Born in in Te Awamutu, New Zealand in 1958, Neil Finn began displaying the marks of a child prodigy by playing and performing music with older brother Tim at family gatherings. Neil took to the piano quickly, teaching himself Beatles tunes, and quickly began composing his own songs (an early composition was a song he set to a Donovan Leitch poem). When singer-songwriters were arguably at their zenith in the early 70s, Neil immersed himself in the music of Elton John, Neil Young, Cat Stevens and Bowie, all immeasurable influences on him. Neil grew fluent on guitar, mandolin and piano.

By the 70s, when Tim's group Split Enz were starting out, Neil co-founded his own band, After Hours. Although the latter group held considerable promise, when Tim offered Neil a membership in Split Enz (after the exit of singer Phil Judd), he stepped up immediately. Neil was just turning 19 and barely familiar with electric guitar, but became seamlessly integrated into the band. By the time *True Colours* was released (Neil's third as a member, featuring the smash hit 'I Got You') the band were catapulted into a higher echelon. Neil's classy love song 'Message To My Girl' illustrated his propensity for writing a classic love song. The band continued on recording and touring until 1985.

When the Enz split (as it were), Neil formed the initial iteration of Crowded House. Over the decade which followed, Crowded House went on to attain international fame, exceeding the success of Split Enz. Their huge international hit, 'Don't Dream It's Over', broke them Stateside. Then, in 1996, at their zenith, Neil made the choice to step away from the band in order to pursue a solo career. In between his visual art projects, he spent the whole of 1997 recording *Try Whistling This*. His first solo foray includes unreleased Crowded House songs that were written for the band but never recorded, plus his own compositions. That year Finn also covered the classic Johnny Nash track 'I Can See Clearly Now' for the animated film *Antz*.

In 1999, he released *Afterglow*, a compilation of Crowded House rare tracks and appeared in a one-off reunion show with Split Enz for the millennial New Year's celebration. Neil then put his solo pursuits on the back burner in 2007, in favour of re-teaming with his brother for a Finn Brothers album, before reuniting with Crowded House for an album, *Time On Earth*, that same year.

Finn has collaborated on material with a diversified roster of musicians including members of Midnight Oil, Sheryl Crow, Radiohead, Pearl Jam (singer Eddie Vedder is a huge Split Enz fan) and Wilco among them on 2009's *The Sun Came Out*, a fundraiser release for Oxfam. A second Crowded House reunion effort, *Intriguer*, was released in 2010, and the following year Finn unveiled a new project, Pajama Club, featuring his wife Sharon on bass. Their self-titled debut was released in September. In 2012, Finn contributed to the soundtrack of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, and his song "The Song of the Lonely Mountain" played over the film's end credits. 2014 saw the release of his third solo effort, *Dizzy Heights*, produced by Flaming Lips and Mercury Rev collaborator Dave Fridmann.

Ultimately Neil has been outstandingly prolific, having released 19 albums thus far. Songs such as 'Something So Strong', 'Don't Dream It's Over', 'It's Only Natural', 'Fall At Your Feet', 'Four Seasons in One Day' and the sublimely Beatles-esque 'She Will Have Her Way' surely established his well-deserved international fame. Simply put: Finn's mixture of lush melodies, meticulous song crafting and disarming vocals – often starting with an acoustic guitar (or piano) – set him apart as a pop music hero for the ages. ■

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